

DIALOGUE ON FAITH AND RACE

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BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES
OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS

THE
CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
of AMERICA 

The logo for The Catholic University of America, featuring the university's name in a serif font and its crest to the right.

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION TEXT

Race and racism are contingent concepts. The way they are understood and lived is shaped by innumerable social factors and forces, many of which have exerted influence over generations.

One of the most powerful of these forces is the stories we tell about our history. Historical narratives are the means by which humanity derives an account and agreement of its past. It is how we establish the meaning of what has come before, and how those meanings organize our lives today. History connects us to place, ancestry, culture, time, and to ourselves. It is a powerful way of understanding who we are and our place in society, both as individuals and social groups.

Historical narratives are more than a set of facts occurring across a timeline. They are also an expression of values. In what a history records, emphasizes, orders, and omits, we find not only a sequence of events. We also find an embedded testament of the values held by those who wrote it.

Different accounts of history are governed by different norms and standards that make the account acceptable to those who read it. Often, through complex social and political processes, certain histories take a canonical place in our collective memory. Vast segments of society come to accept a common version of what has occurred during a given period, and even accept a common categorization of periods into which history can be divided.

In American society, for example, there is a widespread understanding that slavery ended in 1865 with the passing and ratification of the 13th amendment. The period that followed is also widely understood as “the Reconstruction era”. Here, we may ask, what is the relationship between history and truth? What do we mean by slavery? Did this indeed end in 1865? To what extent did it end? For whom did it end? Was its ending total and complete?

If history is indeed a means for understanding ourselves, two widely shared histories of race in the United States present a disturbing mirror into which we might look. In the most dominant history, the role of race is delegitimized and de-emphasized. In this narrative, slavery and its consequences, though regrettable, are entirely in the past, and have nothing to do with the social reality today. Another history, less dominant but still significant, depicts race relations in the U.S. as an unrelenting power struggle. The logic of this latter history suggests that all advances toward justice have come through contest and strife, whether nonviolent or violent. In this view, those without power must always demand it and seize it from those who have it.

There may be shortcomings to both of these histories. For example, how might both of these histories reinforce the centrality of “otherness” in our self-understanding? How might they each exclude or obscure aspects of the complex truth about race in America? How might they each constrain our vision regarding the future of race in America?

Religion, at its best, is a source of ennobling values that uplift the human condition and propel the advancement of civilization. How might the history of race in America be retold, by people of faith, in a way that expresses a conscious commitment to values such as justice and unity? Justice requires us to hold fast to the truth of what has happened in the past, and what is happening now, no matter how uncomfortable and painful that truth may be. At the same time, unity requires us to recognize that humanity is one. The soul has no race. Moreover, on this material plane, the well-being of every soul is inseparably bound up with the well-being of every other soul – like the interdependent cells and organs of a single social body.

Through this lens, we might ask, what have our histories neglected? Are there narratives in our past of interracial cooperation and amity that we might point to and learn from? How can these narratives be told alongside, and

without negating, the painful and necessary narratives of racism and othering? How prominent a place should each occupy in our histories? How should each be framed and interpreted in relation to the other? Can our vision not encompass both? Can we not render both mutually intelligible? Can we not draw important insights from both?

For people of faith, sacred scripture often expresses itself as the history of a people inspired by a Divine Teacher. Such histories have purpose and direction, moving toward the ever-greater realization of God's will through time.

Questions

1. As people of faith, how might our view of history – including American history – shape our view of the present and future?
2. How might we find new ways to tell our history? How might we allow for diverse people to participate in the generation of narratives that inform how we understand history? How might we ensure that the telling of history is not just the domain of a few but is inclusive, real, and accessible to all?
3. Efforts to promote truth and reconciliation can be understood, at least in part, in terms of repair for harm done. How might we repair past harms by deepening the nation's collective understanding of how and why racial categories were constructed, along the enduring impacts and legacies of racism that have resulted? How might this be approached in a manner that enables us to collectively move beyond "othering" so we can construct a more just social order founded on a consciousness of the oneness of humanity?