

Religion is a motivator for justice

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When I explain to people that the U.S. Baha'i Office of Public Affairs organizes interracial and interfaith conversations about the role of religion in eliminating racism as a force in society, people often wonder, "What does religion have to do with eliminating racism?"

It's a fair question, especially given that religious practice has played a role in promoting racial hierarchies and segregation. However, in order to understand how religion can contribute to eliminating racism, we have to understand religion beyond the practices people carry out in the name of religion.

Religion, as I understand it, is a channel of moral guidance that reaches the root of human motivation, awakening in people the capacity to love, to create, to sacrifice, and to overcome prejudice. Religion has assisted humanity to overcome lower impulses of selfishness, othering and mistrust to work together across color, nationality and creed.

Thinking about religion in this way allows us to understand the value of exploring our spiritual nature. At the heart of the Baha'i Faith is the principle of the oneness of humanity — the idea that all human beings share a spiritual nature that transcends all other identities. This principle is far more than a slogan or an abstract and unattainable ideal. It has profound implications for both personal behavior and for the way society should be organized. It challenges many assumptions that structure our current society and revolutionizes our conceptions of the relationships that should exist between the individual, society and its institutions.

Awareness of the spiritual reality of human beings carries with it the moral responsibility that all should be given every opportunity to fulfill their potential and contribute to the advancement of our society. It's only when we understand our spiritual identity that we can begin to value characteristics of our human identity, including race. We can value all aspects of one another's identity through an awareness of the underlying spiritual nature that all human beings share.

Religion can be a source of motivation to help us to remain engaged in difficult conversations on race. It cen-



ters our intentions in the knowledge that human beings are inherently noble. It supplies hope in our abilities to find constructive solutions to problems that seem insurmountable. And, it taps us into our love for God — a love that translates to a love for humanity and a desire to see everyone be prosperous. Qualities such as self-sacrifice, justice and love are spiritual qualities — the common trust given by God to all humanity through all true religion. Religion can provide consistent motivation to practice those spiritual qualities in all areas of society, translating high ideals into action. The systems and structures upon which the United States

is premised lack a firm commitment to these qualities. Too often, our society takes its cues from theories of competition and scarcity. In their shadow, racism thrives.

Among its many symptoms, racism erodes trust between people, preventing us from building a shared understanding of our spiritual qualities and how to apply them to heal ourselves and society. Spaces for meaningful conversation among people of different faiths and races help rebuild this trust. Although people might have different responsibilities in establishing racial justice, there must be trust in the capacity of others to do their part.

Trust is a reciprocal relationship — one must offer it and accept it. Trust requires the telling of truth. Without truth, the full nature of injustice — its effects and the actions needed to end it — become obscured. We should be uncompromising in defense of the truth, yet infinitely gentle and loving as we bring our spiritual principles to bear on the needs of the time we are living in.

Through honest and open dialogue, we challenge our assumptions, reorient our perspectives, and expand our consciousness — crucial practices we need to establish racial justice. In religion, we find both the call to justice as well as the means to achieve it.

May Lample co-coordinates the U.S. Baha'i Office of Public Affairs' collaboration with individuals, organizations and agencies in the United States that are engaged in public discourses and policy advocacy directed toward racial justice and racial unity. Learn more about her work on page 13.