

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE  
DEPARTMENT OF THE SECRETARIAT

28 January 2022

Transmitted by email:

U.S.A.

Dear Bahá'í Friend,

The Universal House of Justice has received your email letter of \_\_\_\_\_, in which you express concern about the dissemination of certain race-related ideas within the American Bahá'í community and what you feel is the unwarranted interpretation of some references from the Bahá'í Writings with respect to such theories. Also received was your email letter of \_\_\_\_\_ related to the same matter, enclosing your correspondence with your National Spiritual Assembly. We have been asked to convey the following.

...

It is evident that, currently, there is in the wider society no consensus on how to assess the problem related to race in America or how to resolve it, even among those well-meaning, fair-minded participants in the discourse on race. In the Bahá'í community as well, individual Bahá'ís may express personal, and sometimes conflicting, views on the subject of race; other friends are welcome to respond to such views. If approached with the necessary spiritual qualities, this exchange can help to gradually create unity of thought and action around the concepts presented in the Bahá'í teachings. Of course, individuals should not represent or convey the impression that their personal ideas constitute the Bahá'í teachings, and correspondingly, Bahá'ís who hear such expressions should distinguish between the authoritative Bahá'í texts and individuals' attempts to explore the concepts contained therein. As you are surely aware, the House of Justice has encouraged the development of communities characterized by tolerance; that implies Assemblies' allowing for the interchange of ideas, including those that some may find uncomfortable.

Naturally, if the promotion of a particular idea leads to disunity within the Bahá'í community, then an Assembly must act. It is noted that you feel that some views, drawing on ideas from the wider society, are harmfully taking root in Bahá'í discourse, and it was reasonable for you to bring your concerns to the attention of your National Assembly. However, it would seem from the response that you received from that body that it does not feel, from its national perspective, that the situation to which you refer extends beyond the individual expression of opinions. No doubt, sensitive to the points you have raised, it will

continue to follow the evolution of the discussion in the community. Of course, if you feel your perspective was not fully appreciated, you can try to offer further clarification for the Assembly, but then it is necessary to leave the matter to the judgment of that institution. Without feeling discouraged, you should continue your own exploration of the issues and work with others in your area to learn to create ever more effective approaches.

Regarding the issue of interpretations of the phrase “pupil of the eye”, ‘Abdu’l-Baha’s statements comparing Black people to the “pupil of the eye” repudiated the pernicious and completely untenable scientific and social assertions circulating at the time that promulgated the odious view that Black people were inferior to white people and, indeed, to all other races. Today, His statements about the pupil of the eye, part of the Bahá’í Sacred Texts, serve as a metaphor that invites the reader to reflect upon and discover a range of meanings from an image that contains profound spiritual import. It points to potentialities that have to find expression in acts of selfless service. Like any artistic or spiritual literary device, however, it must not be taken to extremes in one’s personal interpretation. A metaphor is not to be taken literally. As indicated by your thoughtful insights on the matter, a Bahá’í cannot attribute some meaning to such brief passages that would stand in contradiction to Bahá’u’lláh’s vision of the oneness of humanity. It would also be unproductive and even potentially harmful to extrapolate beyond the evident meaning of the metaphor or to interpolate the Text by assigning meanings that do not exist in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s specific statements or anywhere in the Bahá’í writings—for example, by imputing characteristics to white people or other races.

Racial prejudice—and specifically anti-Black prejudice—has existed in some form in the United States for more than four centuries. The problem did not appear overnight, and the process of healing centuries-old wounds will also take time. The friends should have no illusions about the immensity of what they have been called to do in the writings of the Faith. All Bahá’ís in the United States, whatever their background or country of origin, naturally accept Bahá’u’lláh’s principle of the oneness of humanity. For a Bahá’í, therefore, there is no basis for any suggestion of the superiority or the inferiority of any race. Indeed, the oneness of humanity is the sine qua non of any conception that seeks to overcome racism. But it is one thing to hold a belief in humanity’s oneness and another to build a world that manifests this principle in all its dimensions—particularly in a society that has experienced the intractable and continually mutating forms that racism has taken in response to every effort to eliminate it. Such a complete transformation can only be witnessed in the fullness of time in the spiritual civilization envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh.

In pursuit of this objective, then, all Bahá’ís are called to persistently act, little by little, to deliberately cultivate freedom from racial prejudice within their daily lives, their families, their community-building activities, their involvement with society, and all the social spaces in which they participate, so that they increasingly evince the Bahá’í teachings, especially the oneness of humanity. If the friends become founts of love and create environments wherein the spirit and practice of race unity are prevalent, every trace of race prejudice will ultimately be removed. Yet, to concentrate only on correcting the manifestations of racial prejudice, with an inseparable tendency to focus on the faults of others, rather than on how to work together to create race unity, will invariably lead to a deepening of the differences so widespread in American society.

Let no one suggest that the Bahá'í community stands completely apart and immune from the ills of society. Let no one imagine that it is possible to eliminate every vestige of the impact of racial prejudice on the Bahá'í community before fully engaging in the work of teaching and community building within the wider society. And while there is currently a priceless opportunity for African American believers to reach out to the African American population in the United States, let it not be presumed that in some way this opportunity is closed to Bahá'ís of other racial backgrounds. Rather, the friends should make every effort to reach out to all people, offer the healing remedy of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to everyone, and invite all to participate in the challenging, but rewarding, process of learning to translate what He has written into reality and action. For it is only through an ever-swelling mass of active workers, and their ever-growing capacity to expand the reach of their activities, that the process of creating the expression of race unity in more and more social spaces and of eliminating all forms of prejudice within them can unfold.

To assist in your further reflections on this subject, kindly find enclosed an extract from a letter dated 9 February 1942 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer.

May you be blessed in your endeavors to serve the Cause.

With loving Bahá'í greetings,

Department of the Secretariat

Enclosure

cc: National Assembly of the United States (with enclosure)