



IN PURSUIT OF A MORE SUPERB MISSION

*Exploring a framework
for the elimination of
racial prejudice
in America*

Paul Lample

Paul Lample

**IN PURSUIT OF A
MORE SUPERB
MISSION**

EXPLORING A FRAMEWORK FOR THE
ELIMINATION OF RACIAL PREJUDICE
IN AMERICA

In Pursuit of a More Superb Mission: Exploring a Framework
for the Elimination of Racial Prejudice in America/ Paul Lample,
author

© 2025 Paul Lample
c/o Association for Bahá'í Studies
34 Copernicus Street
Ottawa, ON
K1N 7K4 Canada
<https://www.bahaistudies.ca>

First edition, first printing 2025

Includes bibliographical references
Softcover: ISBN 978-0-920904-44-2
Ebook: ISBN 978-0-920904-45-9

Every effort has been made to acquire permission for copyright material used in this text, and to acknowledge all such indebtedness accurately. Any errors and omissions called to the publisher's attention will be corrected in future printings.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior written consent of the publisher.

Cover image: Farzam Sabetian
Cover design and book design: Nilufar Gordon

Contents

FOREWORD	vii
The nature of an evolving framework for action	4
Some insights from the contemporary discourse on race	10
Distinctive characteristics of a Bahá'í approach	24
Some relevant insights from the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh	31
<i>The principle of the oneness of humanity</i>	31
<i>Oneness expressed as unity in diversity</i>	33
<i>A common identity</i>	35
<i>Justice is manifested by establishing</i>	
<i>proper relationships</i>	37
<i>Just relationships depend on the expression of spiritual</i>	
<i>qualities</i>	38
<i>Shared responsibility</i>	39
<i>Creating ever-larger social spaces that manifest</i>	
<i>the oneness of humanity</i>	42
The Nine Year Plan and the elimination of racial prejudice	45
Learning and the ultimate elimination of racial prejudice	54
Some thoughts on the individual who contributes to the	
elimination of racial prejudice	58
Conclusion	63
SELECTED PASSAGES PERTAINING TO THE ELIMINATION OF RACIAL PREJUDICE	67
WORKS CITED	115
FURTHER READING	117



IN *THE ADVENT OF DIVINE JUSTICE*, SHOH EFFENDI INDICATES that the time would come when the American believers would be called to help eradicate the evil tendency of racial prejudice from the lives and hearts of their fellow citizens. Although when he wrote to them, their community was, as he explained, too restricted in size to have “any marked effect on the great mass of their countrymen,” he encouraged them to begin to make changes among themselves, addressing their needs and deficiencies, in order to better equip themselves for the part they eventually would have to play (21). For more than a century, the American Bahá’í community—first in response to the appeals of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and later to those of the Guardian—attempted to address the problem of racial prejudice within the community and, increasingly, within society. Such efforts were generally sporadic in nature, with periods of intensity and marked progress, but also with periods of diminished attention and limited results.

As new insights have emerged in recent decades from the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, the community has begun to advance in its understanding, and in its capacity for systematic action. And with the escalation of racial division within the wider society in recent years, the Bahá’ís of the United States find themselves in a position to engage in the type of action—sustained and guided by learning—that can release in greater measure the society-building power of the Faith to counteract this long-standing and seemingly intractable challenge. It is now possible to conceive how a more systematic approach to the problem of racial prejudice can, in the decades ahead, unfold in a manner that could profoundly impact American society.

The following sections explore how to learn within an evolving framework for action that can lead, ultimately, to the elimination of racial prejudice in America. The first section discusses the Bahá’í community’s experience with an evolving framework

for action, as it has unfolded over the past two decades under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. The second section is an attempt at reading the reality of the discourse on race and racial prejudice in America—not to produce a comprehensive review or statement about race, but to identify a few insights that can inform the approach of the Bahá'í community to the problem. Next comes a consideration of a range of ideas drawn from the Bahá'í writings that should be part of this conceptual framework, followed by a discussion of the opportunities presented by the current series of Plans for systematic and effective action, and an exploration of the learning process that will ensure that efforts grow in clarity, complexity, effectiveness, and scope over time. Finally, there are a few thoughts about the capabilities required of those who seek to participate in such a formidable field of action. All these thoughts are offered as but one contribution to the vibrant consultation and action already underway in the American Bahá'í community.

The Nature of an Evolving Framework for Action

THE NATURE OF AN EVOLVING FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION HAS BEEN described in the messages of the Universal House of Justice over the past two decades. The framework currently employed in the execution of the Divine Plan encompasses activities related to learning about the processes of community building, social action and involvement in the discourses of society. A letter written on behalf of the House of Justice described this evolving conceptual framework as “a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates” (*Framework for Action* ¶ 54.5). The purpose of adopting such a framework is to help to formulate a shared understanding of the vision, concepts, methods, and approaches that serve as a basis for unity of thought and action in a particular arena of endeavor.

As the friends act together within a common framework for action, learning takes place when certain approaches prove to be effective, and these can be systematically implemented and

The challenge of agreeing on how to address racial prejudice even extends to differences in understanding of the concept of race itself. Is race real? In the view of most religions, and in particular the Bahá'í Faith, humanity is one, and race has no spiritual basis. Scientists have demonstrated the fallacious nature of the belief in a biological basis for race as a physical reality. But it persists nevertheless, and scientific findings are otherwise used to support ideological choices.¹⁶ Yet, whether one insists that race has an objective reality, or whether one concludes that it is imaginary, the conception of race has given rise to a social construct and practice surrounding "race." And as a social construct, the current understanding of race can be changed, or even eliminated. Where did this social conception come from, what form does it take now, and what are the possibilities for the future?

The concepts, values, beliefs, and practices now associated with race at one time did not exist; at a point in history they were created, enforced, and promulgated by human beings. As an aspect of social reality, racialized and racist concepts have been generated and utilized in a highly oppressive manner in particular forms for at least four centuries; as a result, individuals and peoples are socially assigned to specified racial categories. The social construct of race is especially pernicious and deep-rooted. It originated out of a conscious intention to establish the superiority of one group of people over another, in belief and practice. Inseparably intertwined with Enlightenment thought, it was carried throughout the globe by European imperialism,¹⁷ and took root in the American

16 Science has consistently been distorted to try to provide a justification for the dehumanization caused by imagining a racialized hierarchy. When the human genome project was completed, it was considered to be a definitive demonstration that race was not a biological reality for human beings. The differences in the genome of those within a so-called race were much greater than the differences between so-called races. Yet, the belief in race persists. And the new science has been employed to perpetuate the perception of "race," even by those who hope to eliminate racism. See *Fatal Invention: How Science, Politics, and Big Business Recreate Race in the Twenty-first Century*, by Dorothy Roberts. "Race," Roberts concludes, "is not a biological category that is politically charged. It is a political category that has been disguised as a biological one" (Roberts 4).

17 See for example, *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, by Thomas McCarthy, and *The Racial Contract*, by Charles W. Mills.

colonies of the European powers, sowing seeds that continue to bear bitter fruit in the United States today.¹⁸ Whereas it is commonly assumed that the existence of race led to racism, which in turn facilitated slavery, another perspective proposes that in fact, the opposite took place, beginning in America with the first arrival of enslaved Africans in Virginia in the early 1600s. There was a need for cheap labor in the American colonies, and people from both the European and African continents (who would now be considered white and Black people), as well as the Indigenous population, were initially conscripted to this end. Chattel slavery emerged gradually as laws and practices evolved. A need to justify the practice of slavery required the formulation of racist attitudes and structures, and so a language emerged that gave rise to the American conception of race. In essence, this was a process of othering intended to legitimize an unjust practice by dehumanizing a segment of humanity, whose members could then be subjected to that practice. Various peoples who came to the United States were also categorized by racial designations, or otherwise assimilated into the original categories of white and Black. The result was a hierarchical system of othering, with its associated forms of dehumanization and oppression, that has been maintained, in ever-mutating forms, over several centuries.

In this hierarchy, only white people could be seen as fully human, or raceless, or even as true Americans, while the humanity of others was diminished in one way or another. And while efforts to reconstruct the social reality of race in the past century have resulted in some evident progress toward treating diverse ethnicities more equally, true oneness remains elusive. The residual manifestations of injustice in society, whether direct or indirect, affect people differently. Some live oblivious of the impact of racial prejudice, while for others it may be a daily enervating or oppressive burden; and for all too many, the experience of racial prejudice comes in the form of violence.

Though this concept of race is entrenched in American society, because it is a social construct, a different construct—with different concepts, values, beliefs and practices—can ultimately take

18 See, for example, *The Invention of the White Race*, by Theodore W. Allen, and *Teaching White Supremacy: America's Democratic Ordeal and the Forging of Our National Identity*, by Donald Yacovone.

its place. Some, of course, for their own self-centered aims, will strive to maintain the racial hierarchy by altering and disguising its form. But there are other possibilities. One is a multicultural society where a conception of racial categories is maintained, but prejudice is somehow purged, and outcomes are thereby equalized. Yet another possibility would see the elimination of the concept of race in American society, with the unity in diversity of cultures and ethnicities acknowledged and valued.

Yet, experience has demonstrated that attempts to find a path out of the current false and virulent social division of the human family into a racialized hierarchy run into a set of conflicting considerations on the question of whether or not to use racial categories in analyses of, and strategies to overcome, racism. Broadly speaking, there is a tension between race neutrality and race consciousness, or between colorblindness and racial essentialism (framed in more social than biological terms).¹⁹ That is, the idea that people should be treated without regard to race in both public policy and private life is contrasted with the idea that in order to eliminate the effects of racism, it is necessary to take into account the social idea of race, existing in social forms whose boundaries can be defined and whose multiple categories are continually curated.²⁰ While both ideas are taken up, debated, nuanced, and

19 See "A Better Antiracism", by Coleman Hughes. Compare *The End of Race Politics: Arguments for a Colorblind America*, by Coleman Hughes, and *How to Be an Antiracist*, by Ibram X. Kendi. It should be observed that the tension between colorblindness and race consciousness is often presented as a tension between those claiming to be colorblind in order to be exempt from taking action, and those who are trying to do something about existing racial hierarchies. This, of course, produces an untenable situation, but it is not the central issue being raised here. Racial oppression can just as easily be promoted in a form of race consciousness, by insisting upon white superiority and the inferiority of other races. Instead, as mentioned, what is discussed here is the dilemma confronting fair-minded advocates who wish to eliminate racial prejudice, but who cannot agree on a constructive path forward to effect lasting social transformation.

20 See for example, Wairimu Maureen Waithaka, "Learning to Be Black: Navigating a New Identity in Nova Scotia." See also *Deconstructing Race: Multicultural Education Beyond the Color-Bind* by Jabari Mahiri. The following articles explore different dimensions of this issue: Coleman Hughes, "A Better Anti-Racism" and Reihan Salam, "America Needs Anti-Racialism." In

Bahá'u'lláh states that justice “consisteth in rendering each his due” (*Tabernacle* ¶ 2.37), and that the “purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men” (*Tablets* 66). For Bahá'ís, the social order is in a state of disintegration because the way human beings are associated with one another is inadequate for the current requirements of a world that has effectively shrunk into a single neighborhood. The fate of all peoples is now inextricably bound together. The manner of association of past ages, the prejudices and practices that enabled people to oppress and advance themselves over others, are entirely unsuited to humanity's current condition. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains:

The morals of humanity must undergo change. New remedies and solutions for human problems must be adopted. Human intellects themselves must change and be subject to the universal reformation. Just as the thoughts and hypotheses of past ages are fruitless today, likewise dogmas and codes of human invention are obsolete and barren of product in religion. . . . Therefore, it is our duty in this radiant century to investigate the essentials of divine religion, seek the realities underlying the oneness of the world of humanity and discover the source of fellowship and agreement which will unite mankind in the heavenly bond of love. (*Promulgation* 144)

Thus, the aim of Bahá'ís is to learn to establish such just relationships in the world among individuals, communities, and institutions, to heal the differences that have divided humanity, and to contribute to the emergence of a new social order that serves the well-being of all. 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that they must “strive with all their might until universal fellowship, close and warm, and unalloyed love, and spiritual relationships, will connect all the hearts in the world” (*Selections* 21).

JUST RELATIONSHIPS DEPEND ON THE EXPRESSION OF SPIRITUAL QUALITIES

The challenge of building unity, of creating a society in which racial prejudice finds no place, is immeasurably more difficult

than protesting about the existence of racial prejudice, of fighting against its various manifestations, or of criticizing individuals or institutions that fall short in some way. Elimination of racial prejudice requires the establishment of just relationships among individuals, the community, and institutions. And the establishment of just relationships depends on the cultivation and expression of spiritual qualities. Consider, for instance, this vivid description of the example of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cited by Shoghi Effendi:

Let them call to mind, fearlessly and determinedly, the example and conduct of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá while in their midst. Let them remember His courage, His genuine love, His informal and indiscriminating fellowship, His contempt for and impatience of criticism, tempered by His tact and wisdom. Let them revive and perpetuate the memory of those unforgettable and historic episodes and occasions on which He so strikingly demonstrated His keen sense of justice, His spontaneous sympathy for the downtrodden, His ever-abiding sense of the oneness of the human race, His overflowing love for its members, and His displeasure with those who dared to flout His wishes, to deride His methods, to challenge His principles, or to nullify His acts. (*Advent* 34)

In the various paragraphs of his argument in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi returns again and again to the spiritual qualities required for so substantial a transformation in American society as to efface this long standing and deeply rooted evil, sometimes offering insights from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and sometimes presenting his own. The task requires “spiritual love and heavenly harmony,” “perfect love, unity and kindness,” “faith, assurance, and the teachings of the Blessed Beauty” (39), as well as “extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort” (40). These are but a few of the many qualities called for in the Bahá’í teachings to address the challenge of establishing just relationships for a new age of human maturity.