

## Statement on Racism

*By the*

Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the City of Los Angeles

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**A**s our city faces the great challenges of our time--the Coronavirus pandemic, the recession created in its wake and, intimately connected to both, the disease of racism--we address our fellow citizens on behalf of all the Bahá'ís of Los Angeles.

It should be painfully clear to everyone that society must reckon with racism. Here in Los Angeles we have witnessed the Watts Riots of 1965, the Uprising in 1992, and now, again, the demonstrations following the tragic death of Mr. George Floyd on Memorial Day in Minneapolis. The protests are not just here in Los Angeles or only in America but all over the world people of conscience are expressing their collective anger and outrage over the killing of Mr. Floyd while in police custody and the blatant racism his murder represents. The prejudice people in other parts of the world see in America resonates with the prejudice they observe in their own countries.

Just as we believe that all people have souls, so do we believe that all people have rights. Not only do black lives matter, but black lives *must* matter. Because the rights of every citizen are threatened when even one individual's rights are neglected. The Bahá'í sacred writings liken black people to "*the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white*" and that "*through it the light of the Spirit shines forth.*" As a society we must come to grips with the gross injustice that permeates every area of our environment.

Los Angeles is rich in its diversity but sorely lacking in its unity. How long will people of color have to wait before they can expect equal treatment? How long will it take before our global city can truly manifest justice? We can change laws, we can enact different policies but hearts have to be transformed. The unity of humanity—its oneness—must be our goal, regardless of color, ethnicity or religion.

The Bahá'í Faith asserts that the oneness of humanity is central to the principle of unity—the central theme round which revolves all the teachings of our Prophet-Founder, Bahá'u'lláh—and *that this oneness "is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism,"* in the words of His great grandson, Shoghi Effendi, "*or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations.*"

In a larger sense, the oneness of humanity is "*applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family... It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society*" and "*calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world.*"

During the first-half of the 20th century, Shoghi Effendi identified racism as this country's "*most vital and challenging issue.*" He wrote that "*The ceaseless exertions which this issue of paramount importance calls for, the sacrifices it must impose, the care and vigilance it demands, the moral courage and fortitude it requires, the tact and sympathy it necessitates, invest this problem...with an urgency and importance that cannot be overestimated.*"

Since that time, nearly four generations of Americans have contended with the centuries-old legacy of systemic racism. Yes, we can acknowledge that some progress has been made, but we must equally acknowledge that the changes that have taken place aren't enough, not nearly enough, to purge the pervasive disease of racism from the body politic of our global society. Victim and oppressor alike are deeply affected.

Today we mourn the death of George Floyd but we also recall the names of other victims whose lives were similarly taken by those sworn to protect us. Their names are necessary to recount because before George Floyd there was Eric Garner and Manuel Ellis who likewise couldn't breathe from being physically restrained. There was Tamir Rice, a 12-year old boy with a toy gun, and Philando Castile, a young man with a real gun who was shot and killed when he tried to show his permit to carry it. Breonna Taylor and Botham Jean were each mistakenly killed in their own homes while respectively sleeping and watching television. These are just a few of the many victims but their names are necessary to recount, to remember, to reflect.

When we think of their families we think of the sorrow that fills the empty spaces where the lives of their loved ones once stood. We grieve with them as we consider that the heartbreaking loss of a loved one is one of the most painful things anyone on earth can experience. In essence, those families are our families. We feel their pain because we are all part of one global, human family.

The reality is the people of Los Angeles are just as responsible as the people of Minneapolis, New York, Tacoma, Cleveland, Louisville, or Dallas. According to a survey conducted by the *L.A. Times*, the lives of 885 people were taken by law enforcement in Los Angeles County in the last 20 years and nearly 80% of them were Black or Latino. Recognition of the oneness of humanity must be universally implemented if we are to eradicate racism.

As a religious community, Bahá'ís are called to uphold justice, to foster love and unity and to work in concert with others to eliminate prejudice in all its forms. Throughout our country in cities large and small, Bahá'ís are working to bring unity where division currently exists. In every neighborhood, on every block, in every household the Bahá'í Faith encourages people to take charge of their own spiritual development through prayer, through education, through service to others.

To overcome racism, success depends first and foremost on the private and public change of attitude followed by conscious action. Real change--in effect, transformation--comes slowly but inexorably where there is the will and the volition. Everyone is affected by the disease of racism. Everyone must take part in its cure.

Signed,

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