

# From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

## THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

If racial violence and tensions over the past several years—especially in the United States—have taught us anything, it is that any of us who might have imagined that the rampant racism that permeated American society prior to the civil rights movement is now ancient history were dead wrong. True, America had two administrations under a black American president. Surely, we might have thought, such a milestone in American history would signal that racism and racial tensions within the American community finally had been “overcome.”

But with the seemingly ceaseless onslaught of violent encounters between local police and black men in neighborhoods throughout the country, we can no longer pretend that racial prejudice and its offspring of unwarranted and gruesome injustice do not still characterize the American landscape. No longer can we hope that if we never talk about it, racism and the violence it propagates will disappear forever from our public discourse and, collaterally, from our neighborhoods and streets.

But it seems, alas, that hearts and minds cannot so easily be placated by silence alone. Without public

discourse, the plea for justice and unity devolves into mantras, like “Black lives matter!” Injustice and violence once again begin to characterize too much of our public sphere, and all that we thought had vanished from our beautiful American landscape had merely been waiting for the signal to give voice to the rage roiling just beneath the surface, unrecognized by all—except those people who never really were allowed to be oblivious to the “taint” of their skin.

“The New Jim Crow,” Michele Alexander terms this resurgence in her analysis of the present tenor of American society (Michele Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New Press, 2012). And just as soon as we tried to put behind us the injustice of Trayvon Martin’s shooting death, another such injustice would occur, and another, and another, so that very soon none of us could remain blind to the all-too-verified fact that being black or brown or red—anything but white—is one hard row to hoe in America.

How long ago was it that John Howard Griffin, a white American, wrote the international best-selling account of his experiment of pretending to be a black man in America? His *Black Like Me* begins its first entry on 28 October 1959, when I was a sophomore at Vanderbilt University, the highly regarded institution of higher learning in Nashville, Tennessee. I became a Bahá’í at the very end of that year—my brother William Hatcher, one of the founders of this journal, had been a Bahá’í for

about two years in Nashville. And in that Nashville Bahá'í community were stalwart and historically prominent black Bahá'ís like Robert E. Hayden, who would later become poet laureate (the first African American poet to be so honored), and his wife Erma, a teacher and concert pianist, who would eventually be appointed to the National Teaching Committee. There was Dr. Sarah Pereira—a most erudite African American professor at Tennessee State University—later to become a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.

We were all quite close, all dear friends, and yet we never thought to marvel at the fact that only one black student was enrolled at Vanderbilt—Joseph A. Johnson Jr., who famously went on to acquire his PhD in the Vanderbilt Divinity School in 1958 and later became a bishop. For while *Brown v. Board of Education* had been decided six years earlier (1954), in the South, no significant differentiation in the color of student bodies had yet taken place, and it would not be until 1962 that James Meredith would cause great consternation by daring to attend the University of Mississippi.

There were no African Americans on football teams—among the first was Dr. William H. Smith, a Bahá'í and founder of the National Center for Race Amity who has remained involved in civil rights initiatives all his life.

But if you thumb through the pages of my now-brittle paperback copy of Griffin's work, you will quickly realize

that the same things that this white man had to learn quickly to survive as a black are hardly any less pertinent today than they were fifty-eight years ago. More than half a century, and the struggle goes on.

So this year the Bahá'ís of the United States, under the guidance of their National Spiritual Assembly, are launching a number of initiatives that will culminate in a national conference in Washington, DC. The American Bahá'í community has determined that merely articulating noble principles is an insufficient response to Shoghi Effendi's admonition in *The Advent of Divine Justice* that until Americans conquer racism—both among the general population and within the Bahá'í community itself—all other efforts at unity and progress will be forestalled:

As to racial prejudice, the corrosion of which, for well-nigh a century, has bitten into the fiber, and attacked the whole social structure of American society, it should be regarded as constituting the most vital and challenging issue confronting the Bahá'í community at the present stage of its evolution. 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, which the American believers are still far from having satisfactorily

resolved, with an urgency and importance that cannot be overestimated. (33)

And so it is with this issue that the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* begins a discourse that we plan to extend over a long period rather than confine to a single themed publication. We begin with articles that reexamine the beginning of the concept of race itself, which—as the Bahá'í Writings affirm and as most contemporary scholarship concurs—is not a reality but a particularly misguided social construct. An antithesis to the fundamental verity that mankind is one and has been created in the image of its God, it is thus a fiction that drives this animus and divides peoples from one another.

The first of these articles is Matthew Hughey's "Race and Racism: Perspectives from Bahá'í Theology and Critical Sociology," a discussion that, among other things, gives an extremely helpful review of how the concept of race emerged. He also provides a most useful historical analysis of the evolving discourse on racism in the scientific community and compares its findings with the statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, noting how He "makes it clear that the concept of 'races' is based on subjective and artificial categories rather than objectively extant types."

The second article, by Jamar Wheeler, offers a similarly apt beginning for our discourse on race and racism. Titled "Seeking Light in the Darkness of 'Race,'" this discussion also provides

insight into the evolution of racial concepts, though, as Wheeler notes in his abstract, the principal objective of his analysis is to demonstrate that the realization of the oneness of mankind is "an enlightening force," the actualization of which has the power to transform society.

The third article is by longtime Bahá'í scholar June Manning Thomas, Centennial Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at the Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, as well as the Mary Frances Berry Distinguished University Professor. It focuses more on the contemporary challenges of race as related to "division by place" and how that division "affects the possibilities for racial unity, especially in severely fragmented US metropolitan areas." After analyzing the Detroit community as a prime example of this relationship, Manning Thomas examines the salutary effects of the plans instituted by the Universal House of Justice during the sequence of five-year plans that began in 2001. In particular, she studies the outcome of the division of the Detroit community into "clusters" and the subsequent implementation of activities designed to bring about racial unity. For while the Bahá'ís of metropolitan Detroit have always promoted racial unity through race unity picnics, conferences, radio broadcasts, and other public programs, the new framework for action envisioned by the Universal House of Justice focuses explicitly on community building and

thus has inspired various strategies not tried heretofore, such as selecting neighborhoods with some presence of certain minority populations and subsequently employing various practices of the institute process, programs that have been successfully employed by Bahá'ís throughout the world.

The final, brief, article, by Diane Coin, was originally conceived as a lengthier and more in-depth book review than those we usually publish. Coin presents us with a timely and sensitive examination of Jennifer Harvey's *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation* (William B. Eerdmans, 2014). Both the book itself and the keen analysis of its merits by Coin are a fitting conclusion to this issue, even though the subject of race will continue to be a motive force in the journal for the indefinite future. For as Coin observes, "Justice and racial identity are squarely at the center of Harvey's revealing conclusion that as long as the racial divide is addressed through the lens of reconciliation (or the 'reconciliation paradigm' as she names it), both healing and true unity will continue to elude not only Christians, but all of us who care."

Finally, we include two very touching poems. The first, "The Mind-Body Divide," is by longtime ABS member and supporter Sheila Banani, who was inspired to share this poem as a response to her reading of Ian Kluge's well-received article in our previous issue (volume 27, no. 1–2) titled "The Bahá'í Philosophy of Human Nature."

The second poem is "Flight" by Tami Haaland, whose work we have published before. It is a brief lyric capturing a moment of delight as only a poem can, and it demonstrates well Robert Hayden's axiom that a poem is a means by which one can convey what is otherwise unsayable.

Finally, the cover painting is "The Colors at Sunset" by renowned landscape artist Roger Bansemer calls to mind a line in the poem "The Road Not Taken" by Robert Frost. The speaker in the poem observes that when he came upon a fork in the road, he chose the path "less traveled by" and concludes that this choice "has made all the difference." Certainly, the choices we make and how we make them as we respond to contemporary social challenges—especially regarding race and racism—will make all the difference in our lives and possibly in the lives of others.