

# RACIAL U

AN IMPERATIVE FOR  
SOCIAL PROGRESS



RICHARD W. THOMAS

With a Foreword by John H. Stanfield, II

PUBLISHED BY THE ASSOCIATION FOR BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

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## **Revised edition**

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*To my students*

*May they come to understand  
how the power of racial unity  
can transform the world*



*The second edition of this book is dedicated to the memory  
of my beloved Bahá'í sister Marilyn Green (1932–1992)  
who for many years was the guiding spirit of racial unity  
on the National Race Unity Committee of the  
Bahá'ís of the United States and for countless efforts of  
interracial unity and harmony*

## Foreword

We are in a most profound sense already in the twenty-first century. Yet we have still to figure out what to do about the most daunting question of the century we have in many ways already left. As that great intellectual William E. B. Du Bois predicted so concisely over eight decades ago, the problem of the twentieth century would be the color line. It is still with us and promises to remain and indeed fester in dangerous ways unless we begin to look soberly into the glass darkly before us. In this thought-provoking book, Professor Richard W. Thomas offers insights into why race continues to eat away at the soul of America despite occasional episodes of race-relations reform movements in American history.

The nineteenth century was the era in which race was first fashioned as a social ideology and political weapon designed to rationalize the formation of massive modes of economic inequality such as slavery and other forced labor systems. Race became the chief cornerstone of the emotional development and status identity of European-descent colonizers and nation-state builders and of the millions of people of color they oppressed. Twentieth-century citizens witnessed the use of such dangerous myths in the stabilization and decline of European-descent and Asian-descent empires and the development of racially segmented Western nation-states.

Twentieth-century American history can only be read when this racial context is considered. No matter where we look, race has continued to matter as the twentieth-century United States has evolved gradually from being a rural to an industrial to a post-industrial nation-state. It has mattered as a central rationale for how and why twentieth-century Americans have decided to participate in wars around the world and even in terms of how Americans have defined peace. Race has figured centrally in the formation of twentieth-century American cities, employment markets, educational attainment, politics, popular culture, and organized religion. The critical involvement of Americans in the creation and entrenchment of the Cold War as a mentality as well as a way of defining and distributing international power had racial components both domestically and abroad. The emerging post-Cold War period in the world system is unleashing ancient ethnic and racial antagonisms held in uneasy check by ideological regimes while Americans stand by rather helplessly caught in the vise grip of surging urban racial violence and racist social movements on the domestic scene.

So, as we begin to define at least the first decades of the twenty-first century, we do so with the albatross of race hanging tightly around our necks. Some of us are gasping for breath as we try to disentangle our necks from the embracing feathered beast. But, most of the world, most

Americans, remain oblivious even passive when it comes to efforts to escape from the crucible of race. They see the race riots on television and even in their neighborhoods. They continue to reside in racially homogeneous communities and work at jobs with only a few, if any, people of color, especially in authority positions. Most Americans still do not think something is wrong with statistics that reveal most whites and non-whites do not cross the color line when it comes to residence, friendship, marriage, and family development. The fact that most Americans do not question the relevance of viewing themselves and others in racial terms and basing critical life decisions on racial criteria is more than obvious. Race is such a primary factor in American perceptions of the self and the other that racelessness as a perception and as an identity is almost unheard of or is viewed as a deviant status (e.g., "nigger lover" or "Uncle Tom").

What is so tragic about the persistent though historically unique ways in which racial segmentation has remained central in the development of Americans as human beings and in the evolution of America as a nation-state is that there have been a number of missed windows for effective anti-racism which subsequently closed. The opening and shutting of such windows of opportunities to transform Americans into raceless human beings and America into a raceless nation-state have occurred with enough frequency to remind us that race continues to exist as an integral part of American lives because we want it there. Race as a way of thinking, defining status hierarchies, exploiting labor, and maintaining political and cultural control has become too profitable for most white Americans, including those who hold otherwise progressive views. It has even become profitable for not a few Americans of color who use their subordinate status as an excuse for their lowly status, as an excuse for being powerless, or as a means to exploit their own communities and people.

There are two issues that make this timely book essential reading. First, Professor Thomas reminds us of the historical windows—the chances Americans had to change the course of race relations from negatives to positives and failed to do so. It is clear that through the decades and centuries, the profitability of race has been so great that Americans in leadership positions—Presidents on down—have been more willing to preserve racial status quo than to apply democratic principles to eradicate the plight of the racially oppressed. It has been more convenient for political establishments to use race as a form of cultural currency for winning elections and for creating and maintaining divisions among the poor and middle classes than for developing a just society in which racial inequality is delegitimated as an ideology and practice. Journalists discovered in the nineteenth century, as they have in the twentieth century, that racial violence and debates over racial inferiority and superiority are more to the public's liking and thus sell more copy than do episodes of racial harmony and racelessness.

Consequently, the historical success of antiracist movements and legislation has tended to be, in the long run, quite limited. Although the early nineteenth-century abolitionist movement put moral pressure on the American public and political processes to end slavery, it did little to influence the dismantling of racial hierarchies (especially since many famous and not so famous abolitionists may have been opposed to slavery on moral grounds but viewed blacks as an inferior race). The 1950s–1960s civil rights movement maimed Jim Crow quite badly but did not completely destroy it. The emergence of the post-1970s new right and the accompanying resurgence of rabid racism has been a tragic empirical indicator that 1950s–1960s civil rights leaders were unable to complete the reform work necessary to make racial justice a permanent cornerstone of American life.

Second and most important, Professor Thomas reminds us in no uncertain terms that the battle for racial justice in the United States and elsewhere has been most successful when movement efforts have a spiritual premise. His examination of the racial unity philosophies of the Quakers, Martin Luther King, Jr., and most extensively of the Bahá'í community illustrate this contention quite well. The deeply rooted presence of race in the emotional beings of Americans often prevents even the most religious from grasping the meaning and value of racial unity (which is why, as King pointed out, the most segregated hour in America is 11 a.m. on Sundays).

Professor Thomas's narrative and interpretations offer a unique contribution to twentieth-century American cultural history in bringing to light the perspectives of the historical Bahá'í leadership, which advocated the development of an American branch, void of racism in the midst of the entrenchment of a formally segregated—Jim Crow—nation-state. The evolution of the American Bahá'í community from one with an ambiguous-to-negative perspective on racial issues to one on the forefront of civil rights is a fascinating case study in the ways in which institutions and communities can, if the collective wills it, transform themselves into instruments of change rather than of status quo maintenance. This transformational experience is especially important when it comes to religious institutions and communities in which more often than should be the case, spiritually minded people find it to be no contradiction to harbor racial prejudices.

When our lives are truly liberated spiritually from the social and cultural traditions that encourage racial criteria to taint our definitions of self and others, there is a truly revolutionary experience. This is why once a person takes a spiritual perspective and has eaten of the consequential blessed fruits of inner peace and social harmony, there is no turning back from relishing the virtues of racial unity. What gave King his strength was the spiritual revelation that he could fight for racial justice because he was located in a spiritual plane which could not be touched by human hands or even feelings. Through his visionary eyes, he could see racial unity, since he had reached a point of spiritual maturity wherein he no longer gazed at flesh and blood, but at the universal unity of human beings.

This book is important since it is now "OK" for upwardly mobile and well-established Americans to have spiritual consciousness. Everywhere we turn there is an upsurge of spiritual concern in America. Even psychiatrists are beginning to admit that having spiritual values is an important balancer, indeed anchor, in human life.

But before it was "OK," many Americans used their spiritual values as ways to prioritize in their lives and as a means to make choices. The problem with the present and historical lives of many otherwise spiritually minded Americans is that they have yet to extend their well-being to the issue of race. Their lives are still rooted in segregated or marginally integrated families, friendship circles, communities, workplaces, civic associations, and political circles. That is the real reason why this book is important. No matter what our faith, those of us who center our lives in living for a higher power must extend that faith to dismantle our private attitudes, beliefs, and conduct which are consciously or unconsciously racial. And when we are done with ourselves, we individually and collectively should turn to others and use our faith to convert them to the faith of human unity. Perhaps strange to some, the more truly spiritual (as opposed to religious) we become, the more we find that the beauty of race-free lives, institutions, and communities makes the inevitable suffering at the hands of those who do not see, worth going through and even rejoicing about. This is why truly spiritually minded people who have "been to the mountain top" cannot help but act in unity with others to liberate the world from a most fundamental source of human misery and misunderstanding—race. The more we look through the glass clearly as our spirits are cleansed from the pollutants of a racialized nation-state and world, the more activist antiracism becomes a top priority in our lives no matter who we are and no matter the material cost.

Thus Professor Thomas has performed a brilliant intellectual task in pricking our consciousness and opening our eyes to what really matters in fighting the good fight for racial justice: becoming as spiritually centered as we profess to be and then taking a fervent stand for racial justice no matter the sacrifice, no matter the pain.

JOHN H. STANFIELD, II

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and Professor of Sociology  
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April 19, 1993



## Preface

I would like to thank the readers of the first edition of this book for their overwhelming support for the first edition, and I apologize to those who have been waiting patiently for far too long for the second edition. After the first edition sold out, we decided to add a chapter on black–white relations in the ancient Mediterranean world and to extend the chapter on the Bahá'í community in the United States up to the present. Both the publishers and I hope that readers agree these additions were worth the wait. We feel certain that these additions will increase awareness and appreciation of the impact of racial justice and unity on social progress, and we intend to continue expanding this book in future editions. Therefore, we invite all readers to send in their comments to assist us in developing this book to meet the needs and concerns of all readers. We see this book as a collaborative enterprise of the writer, publisher, and reader in a community of service to humankind.

## Preface to First Edition

This book has been germinating for many years. As a teacher and researcher in both African-American history and race relations, I have been discussing many of these issues in my courses with my students for close to twenty years. My initial interest in race relations originated from several sources: the primary source is the Bahá'í community in the United States, which has provided me with a human laboratory where I have been able to experience first-hand the interaction among racially and culturally diverse peoples. For nearly thirty years I have not only observed a process of community building among these diverse peoples but also witnessed a transformation of their traditional prejudices, fears, and anxieties into bonds of interracial and multicultural fellowship. I have watched and been involved in the painful process of confronting racism within this community, and I have experienced along with others the joy of working through the various stages of white racism and black bitterness to interracial bonding. This process continues.

The second source of my interest in race relations grew out of my involvement in the Civil Rights Movement as a young black student. Observing blacks and whites marching together confirmed my belief in the imperative of racial unity for the social good of the United States and the world.

The third source of my interest has been the classroom where for over twenty years I have been able to teach students from many racial backgrounds—but mainly blacks and whites—about the history of racism and how best to combat it and to work together for the achievement of a multiracial society based on justice, love, and fellowship. In a way, this book has been written for them.

The title of this book, *Racial Unity: An Imperative for Social Progress*, originated from a series of lectures I gave at various universities in Canada and the United States during the late 1980s. As a result of long years of teaching about the history of racism, I felt compelled to include the history of “the other tradition” of American race relations, namely: the history of the interracial struggle for racial justice, unity, love, and fellowship. People needed to know, I reasoned, both the history of racism *and* the history of those who have struggled against racism and have envisioned a social order in which people not only accept each other as equal but also have a profound appreciation of each other as members of the one human family. Chapter 8, “Towards a Model of Racial Unity: A Case Study of Bahá'í Teachings and Community Practices,” is presented here as one model of “the other tradition” in the hope that the reader will find something of value in this particular multicultural religious community. While there are other

multicultural religious communities, I felt that I could best serve the interests of research in the field of race relations by focusing upon the multicultural religious community of which I have the most knowledge. Furthermore, the Bahá'í community in the United States offers scholars of race relations one of the best laboratories for future research on the process by which people from diverse religious, racial, national, and cultural backgrounds are engaged in building a racially unified spiritual community. So, in one sense, this brief and very general historical essay is a statement of my belief and dearest hope that black and white Americans can transcend their common racial history and create a truly racially just, loving society that can be a model of unity for the world to emulate.

## Acknowledgements

Thanks to Kyungsik Irene Shim for assistance with this project. She was joined by Kimberly Andrew, graduate student in history, Michigan State University. Both assisted in library research on chapter two.

## Acknowledgements for the First Edition

This book is the product of many devoted people. Foremost among them is Christine Zerbinis of the editorial board of the Association for Bahá'í Studies who coordinated the work of all those involved in the heroic effort of getting this book ready in time for the Model of Race Unity Conference in Atlanta. Two of my graduate students, Kyungsik Irene Shim and Shobha Ramanand, also deserve a special note of thanks, Shobha for her extensive library work in verifying references and Irene for her long hours spent assisting me in historical research. Her considerable skills proved invaluable in the final stages of checking sources. Several readers contributed their time in reading portions of the manuscript: the main ones included Professor Harry Reed, History Department, Michigan State University, and Professor Ruth Harris, Department of Afro-American Studies Center, State University of New York, Brockport.

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# 1

## *Racial Unity* *An Imperative for Social Progress in America* *and Other Multiracial Societies*

Among the moral imperatives of our time, we are challenged to work all over the world with unshakable determination to wipe out the last vestiges of racism. . . . We know full well that racism is still the hound of hell which dogs the tracks of our civilization.

—Martin Luther King, Jr.

Racism has cost the world dearly. Systems of racial domination in the Americas, Asia, and Africa have left a trail of blood and anguish down through history, imposing upon the present generation a legacy of hatred and racial conflict. Centuries of racial dominance have created centuries of racial distrust among the oppressed—centuries of distrust that have festered into countless manifestations of racial disunity in multiracial societies around the world. We have only to turn our attention to the periodic racial disruptions in the United States, South Africa, and England to see what the future might continue to be like for those multiracial societies that fail to address their racial problems effectively.<sup>1</sup>

While multiracial nations have just begun to recognize the global impact of their domestic racism and the extent to which their individual countries can be suddenly sucked into a racial maelstrom of international magnitude, many citizens of multiracial societies fail to understand the connection between their domestic racial policies and world peace. In

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1. John Benyon and John Solomos, "British Urban Unrest in the 1980s" 3–22 and Stuart Hall, "Urban Unrest in Britain" 45–50, in John Benyon and John Solomos, eds., *The Roots of Urban Unrest*; John Rex, "Racialism and the Urban Crisis," *Race, Science and Society* 262–300; Jonathan Kaufman, *Broken Alliance: The Turbulent Times Between Blacks and Jews in America*; Lena Williams, "Officials Voice Growing Concern Over Racial Incidents on U.S. Campuses," *The New York Times*, December 15, 1986, p. A18; "Black Rage, White Fist," *Time*, August 5, 1985: 24–33.

1976, an editorial in the *Detroit Free Press* alerted its readers to such a connection when it warned: "A lot of history is bearing down on us now. . . . And the implications of . . . racial conflict, not only throughout southern Africa, but throughout much of the world, are ominous."<sup>2</sup>

The global ramifications of domestic racism and conflict became clearer as concerned scholars and journalists began writing on the subject, particularly during the era of urban racial turmoil in the United States. In 1967, the year of the Detroit race riot, the worst race riot in American history, Ronald Segal published a book entitled *The Race War* in which he described the future of global race relations in the following terms: "In a world where the white rich seek to preserve an order against which the coloured poor rebel, the central fact of the past will increasingly be seen as the domination of the one by the other, just as the central fact of the future will increasingly emerge as the struggle between them." Justifying the provocative title of his book, he continued: "The phrase 'race war' is a strong one, but no stronger, I believe, than the steadily increasing hostility between white and non-white fully warrants. The two colours are physically clashing in a dozen parts of the world already, whether through riots in the slums of American cities or the engagement of guns in South Vietnam and Angola." Therefore, Segal argued, "It is the contention of this book that the occasions for clash must multiply, and the war grow ever more intense, unless the circumstances which provoke the antagonisms of race are themselves removed."<sup>3</sup>

It was not to be. The "antagonisms of race" remain virtually untouched throughout the potential racial hot spots of the world.<sup>4</sup>

Although some citizens of multiracial societies have just begun to understand that social and economic justice are preconditions for racial unity and that racial unity is an imperative for social progress, multiracial societies such as the United States and South Africa are still paying the cost for refusing to learn this lesson. What is the reason for this blind and irrational refusal to abandon racial prejudice in these societies? Why have the dominant white groups in America and South Africa clung to their

2. Editorial, *Detroit Free Press*, September 21, 1976.

3. Ronald Segal, *The Race War* vii, 1. This theme of race war has been echoed through the centuries by such observers of race relations as Thomas Jefferson and W. E. B. Du Bois; see discussion of Jefferson (in Chapter 4) and Du Bois (in Chapter 7).

4. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, blacks in the South African townships, particularly Soweto, rebelled against the system of apartheid. In Britain during the 1980s, racial conflicts erupted in several cities, including Brixton, Handsworth in Birmingham, Sheffield, and Tottenham in London. In America, the worst racial conflicts of the 1980s broke out in May, 1980, in Miami, Florida. See Benyon and Solomos, *Roots* 3–14; Harris Joshua and Tina Wallace with the assistance of Heather Booth, *To Ride the Storm: The 1980 Bristol "Riot" and the State* 56–210; "Black Rage, White Fist" 24–28; "Confronting Racial Isolation in Miami" v. 26.



ideologies of white supremacy for so long? What is it about racial superiority that makes it so appealing to some segments of these societies that, for example, South Africa cannot imagine treating all human beings fairly?

Fortunately, there are great signs of hope operating throughout the world. As bad as apartheid is in South Africa, it has generated an international movement composed of people from many nations, races, and religious backgrounds dedicated to the elimination of apartheid. This international anti-apartheid movement is transforming the face of the planet, bonding many people who previously knew or cared little about their common humanity. In America, where the resurgence of racism has understandably frightened and angered many people who grew up during the Civil Rights Movement believing in "the Beloved Community," where there is still much resistance to and misunderstanding of such policies as affirmative action, and where blacks and whites in most major metropolitan areas are more segregated than ever before, brave bands of multiracial people are struggling against racism and racial conflicts. Groups and organizations such as Mothers for Race Unity and Equality in California, the Interracial Family Alliance, Focus Hope in Detroit, and the race unity programs of the American Bahá'í community are more than just isolated "points of light." Rather, they represent a new consciousness within many multiracial societies that social progress is impossible without racial justice and unity.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nations has long recognized the connection between racial justice and unity and social progress within the global community. The Sub-Commission on Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, one of the United Nations' many organs, was set up in 1947 by the Commission on Human Rights. It was given the mandate "to undertake studies, particularly in the light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and to make recommendations to the Commission on Human Rights concerning the prevention of discrimination of any kind . . . and the protection of racial, national, religious and linguistic minorities." In 1949, a group of experts on racial problems, meeting in Paris under the auspices of

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5. The most dramatic example of this international movement against apartheid was seen in the world tour of Nelson Mandela, the leader of the African National Congress. However, many ordinary people also participated in this global movement for racial justice. For example, in 1984, eleven supermarket employees in Ireland were fired when they refused to handle South African fruit. After three years of pickets at the store, a court decided that the employees had been unfairly dismissed. See Martin Gottlieb, "Mandela's Visit, New York's Pride," *The New York Times*, June 24, 1990, sect. 4, p. 1; Marcus Eliason, "Irish eyes smile upon Mandelas," *Lansing State Journal*, July 2, 1990, p. 3A; Focus Hope was started in Detroit about a year after the 1967 riot. See Richard W. Thomas, "Looking Forward: The Detroit Experience after the Riots of 1943 and 1967" in Benyon and Solomos, *The Roots* 150; Mothers for Race Unity and Equality was founded by LeNeice Jackson-Gaertner in the late 1980s, leaflet, "Mothers for Race Unity and Equality," see parts 3 and 4 for information on the Interracial Family Alliance and the Bahá'í Community.