

## **FROM THE UN: RACISM**

*Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, the IHEU and National Ethical Service representative to the UN  
Dr. Reba Goodman, member of ECSBC*

Racial and ethnic divisions are global issues with a long and tortured history. During the Constitutional Convention (1787) in the US, black slaves were counted as three fifths of a person in a compromise that enabled Southern states to increase their representation in the House of Representatives in Congress, which is a cynical symbol of dehumanization.

Racism in the US was brutal, starting with the bitter Atlantic crossing, legal treatment of slaves as property and wealth, a savage Civil War, followed by lynching, Jim Crow laws, and the difficulties of the civil rights movement. Much later Civil Rights laws were passed including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights and Fair Housing Acts of 1968. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of integration of US public schools. However, long after official desegregation US public schools are actually more segregated today than they were in the 1960s. This is due, in part, to residential segregation. The Fair Housing Act has been only partially effective.

Barak Obama's election as the 44<sup>th</sup> president was met with pride by some, but has created a racial backlash in others and a significant increase in anti-black attitudes. In 2008, the Associated Press released the results of attitudes toward black showing that 48 percent of whites admitted having prejudices against blacks. Four years later in 2012 that very same poll showed the number increased to 51 percent.

The recent incidents of the killing of unarmed Black men—for example Eric Garner in Staten Island, New York and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri by white police officers—has sparked a renewed look at racism in the US. In both cases, Grand Juries failed to indict the officers involved. This ruling, justifiably, provoked a wave of protests.

The current state of inequality of Blacks and others is stark. Blacks are nearly three times as likely as non Hispanic Whites to be poor, almost six times as likely to be in jail, and only half as likely to graduate from College. The average wealth of white households is 13 times higher than that of black households.

### **How does one explain these inequalities?**

One widespread approach is to attribute racial inequality to minorities themselves. This attitude is in tune with the American traditional focus on individuals. Whites often view Blacks as lazy and irresponsible. Everyone can succeed if they try and those who don't succeed just aren't trying and there is no use crying "racism." The failure of African Americans to prosper is seen as a personal failing. In a 2013 Gallop Poll, 83 percent of whites said factors other than discrimination are to blame for lower levels of employment, lower incomes and lower quality housing. A plurality of whites in a recent Pew survey said that the issue of race is getting more attention than it deserves. A common remark in the same vein is that Irish, Italians, and Jews overcame prejudice and worked their way up so Blacks should do the same without any special favors.

Another approach is to point out the powerful role that history plays. Blacks didn't come here voluntarily. They were treated brutally on the transatlantic trip. They were dehumanized and treated like animals. Often Black women were bred since their children represented increased wealth to their owners, and their families could be broken up and sold for profit. They were not allowed to learn to read.

Generations of slavery, and after the Civil War, years of Jim Crow, have created conditions that make it difficult for them to make their way out. Furthermore kids are relegated to inferior schools, live in horrible neighborhoods, and often grow up in broken families. In more recent times, many of the jobs that were once available are gone due to Globalization and Automation. Only recently, the US Supreme Court revisited the Voting Right Act making it more difficult for Blacks to vote.

Of course, some Blacks succeed but overwhelmingly the odds are stacked against them. Many grow up without hope. Recently a telling interchange took place between Hillary Clinton and some leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement. The issue was promoting racial progress: Which comes first: changing hearts or changing laws? Clinton said, "I don't believe you change hearts. I believe you change laws and you change allocation of resources, you change the way the system works."

We applaud the **Black Lives Matter movement** for they correctly have put the lives of Blacks on the agenda. Laws are, of course, important as long as they are funded and implemented. The allocation of resources seems hopeless given the increasing skewness of the income distribution favoring the rich. Given the current divisions in Congress passing and funding laws reducing poverty and fixing broken neighborhoods is not in the cards.

To quote the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin "Hearts can change and it's often social movements that create it."