

Scientific and Spiritual Dimensions of Climate Change

Unit 6 – Part 2

Materialism

(Additional Resource)

Section 1: A Balanced Approach to Material Things and Progress

Let us think about how we allowed climate change and the overall environmental crisis to reach the critical point of endangering our very survival. The main underlying reason is materialism, and that's what this reading is about.

However, to be fair, we need to preface this with acknowledging two things:

First, the Baha'i teachings do not advocate ascetism; they encourage us to enjoy the beautiful things creation offers us, as long as we are spiritually detached from them and observe moderation.

God hath ordained every good thing, whether created in the heavens or in the earth, for such of His servants as truly believe in Him.¹

It is also essential that the basic needs of all human beings are met. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains the importance of justice and equity:

We ask God to endow human souls with justice so that they may be fair, and may strive to provide for the comfort of all, that each member of humanity may pass his life in the utmost comfort and welfare. Then this material world will become the very paradise of the Kingdom, this elemental earth will be in a heavenly state and all the servants of God will live in the utmost joy, happiness and gladness. We must all strive and concentrate all our thoughts in order that such happiness may accrue to the world of humanity.²

The second introductory point is that, in the past, while we certainly knew about the human costs of industrialization, namely the exploitation of workers, we honestly didn't know about the far-reaching environmental consequences of industrialization.

Scientific and technological advances have allowed our cultures to progress in numerous positive ways. Just think about means of communication, like the telephone or the Internet, or about the fast means of transportation that allowed the coming together of cultures. Since the Industrial Revolution, machines have been doing much of our work connected to our everyday needs, freeing up large parts of humanity to have some free time to pursue other activities such as science, art, literature, and music. Instead of gathering wood and tending to a fire we just turn on the stove or the heat. Instead of walking or riding, we save much time with a train or car and therefore can accomplish much more. Electrical appliances have made our lives much easier. There is nothing inherently evil in all of that.

Although the greenhouse effect has been known since the 19th century, there was no strong evidence of global warming until about 1979. We just didn't know that the burning of fossil fuels would have these unintended consequences. Now, our whole existence is dependent on fossil fuels: our transportation, our food system, and especially our energy supply are all based on fossil fuels. Even with best intentions it is not easy to abandon these systems, to think out of the box, and to act in an environmentally responsible way. However, that is exactly what we must do!

At the same time, while science and technology have advanced, the inner spirit of religion has diminished. The Baha'i Writings tell us that without religion, society will be engulfed by materialism:

*Religion and science are the two wings upon which man's intelligence can soar into the heights, with which the human soul can progress. It is not possible to fly with one wing alone! Should a man try to fly with the wing of religion alone, he would quickly fall into the quagmire of superstition, whilst on the other hand, with the wing of science alone he would also make no progress, but fall into the despairing slough of materialism.*³

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Section 2: Materialism at the Root of Social Injustice

Already in 1954, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, warned about materialism in the strongest terms:

...the crass materialism, which lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society.

*It is this same cancerous materialism, born originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent, contaminating the Asiatic peoples and nations, spreading its ominous tentacles to the borders of Africa, and now invading its very heart, which Bahá'u'lláh in unequivocal and emphatic language denounced in His Writings, comparing it to a devouring flame and regarding it as the chief factor in precipitating the dire ordeals and world-shaking crises that must necessarily involve the burning of cities and the spread of terror and consternation in the hearts of men. ...*⁴

Materialism is at the root of many evils. It is the expression of greed stemming from man's lower animal nature. Materialism has been the underlying cause, not only of the destruction of nature, but for millennia also of the exploitation of human beings. Materialism was the driving force behind colonization with its catastrophic outcomes of genocide, cultural destruction, and oppression of Indigenous people.

Materialism has also been the motive behind the exploitation of people with slavery. The Greeks and Romans had slaves; the Egyptians built the pyramids with slaves; throughout centuries, people in power have exploited the majority of the population through forced labor. The abuse of forced labor at the beginning of the Industrial

Revolution in England gave rise to communism. However, communism shares an equally dismal history of human rights violations and environmental destruction as capitalism because it was also based on a materialistic view of the world.

In its Peace Message of 1985, the Universal House of Justice clearly spells out that both capitalism and socialism have not worked out because of their underlying materialism:

*The time has come when those who preach the **dogmas of materialism**, whether of the east or the west, **whether of capitalism or socialism**, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the “new world” promised by these ideologies? Where is the international peace to whose ideals they proclaim their devotion? Where are the breakthroughs into new realms of cultural achievement produced by the aggrandizement of this race, of that nation or of a particular class? Why is the vast majority of the world’s peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs?²⁵*

Materialism also caused people to falsely justify the exploitation of other people because of their race. Racism was formerly sanctioned by society because it provided cheap labor for a flourishing economy. Baha'u'llah prohibited slavery and praised Queen Victoria for the abolishment of slavery in the British Empire early in the 19th century. Since then, slavery has become morally unacceptable all over the world. Sadly, many people are still living in slave-like conditions. Today, however, companies are trying to hide this practice, and people are openly speaking up against this evil. It is interesting to note that the discovery of coal, oil, and gas as energy sources has contributed to the relatively quick end of slavery in the industrial nations because machines replaced the work formerly performed by enslaved people.

In the past, the main argument for slavery was that it was essential for the economy. Well, that is exactly what many people say today about fossil fuels: Our economy depends on the energy provided by fossil fuels. That is why many people continue to promote the use of fossil fuels just as people did in the past to justify slavery. If the harm of climate change inflicted on people and all living things is considered, this argument is similarly morally corrupt.

Section 3: The Need to Create a New Economy, Not Rebuild a Harmful System

It is impossible to have perpetual economic growth in a finite biosphere. We must learn to accept the limits of our planet. While less economically advantaged nations should have the right to sustainable development, the rich countries, and the planet as a whole, have reached the limits of growth; in fact, these limits have already been dangerously surpassed.

The current capitalistic economy exploits the Earth and destroys its life-support systems. It also exploits many people and exacerbates the extremes of wealth and poverty.

The Universal House of Justice wrote:

*Consider, ..., how materialism widens the extremes of wealth and poverty and how economic injustice produces rifts that intensify prejudice, even among similarly marginalized peoples. Competition for limited resources sullies personal and collective motives and generates hostilities and jealousies that embitter relationships.*⁶

People of color and indigenous people are suffering the most. Moreover, if business continues as usual with humans living beyond the carrying capacity of the Earth, its life-support systems will be destroyed leading to collective suicide. “Re-building” the economy is not the answer; a new economy based on justice and environmental sustainability must be created. The Baha’i-Writings say: “...political and economic theories are solely designed to safeguard the interests of humanity as a whole, and not humanity to be crucified for the preservation of the integrity of any particular law or doctrine.”⁷

Section 4: Moderation in Civilization

Baha’u’llah called for moderation in civilization:

*The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation.*⁸

The above paragraph begins with these words:

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation.

Moderation is essential for justice, and justice is the prerequisite for unity, as Baha’u’llah said:

*The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.*⁹

The Universal House of Justice points to materialism and consumerism as breeders of conflict:

*Today the world is assailed by an array of destructive forces. Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skilfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the basest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict. How vain and foolish a worldview!*¹⁰

Materialism and consumerism are harmful for our spiritual as well as our physical well-being. The Universal House of Justice wrote:

... true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul; ...¹¹

Section 5: The Harm of Materialism to the Human Soul

Bahá'ulláh warned about the effect of materialism on the human soul:

When the eyes of the people of the East were captivated by the arts and wonders of the West, they roved distraught in the wilderness of material causes, oblivious of the One Who is the Causer of Causes, and the Sustainer thereof...¹²

He also emphasized the importance of moderation in the consumption of material things and links it again to equity and justice:

Take from this world only to the measure of your needs, and forgo that which exceedeth them. Observe equity in all your judgments, and transgress not the bounds of justice, nor be of them that stray from its path.¹³

The Universal House of Justice described the harmful effect of a consumer culture on society:

Consumer culture, today's inheritor by default of materialism's gospel of human betterment, is unembarrassed by the ephemeral nature of the goals that inspire it. For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic. Emboldened by the breakdown of traditional morality, the advance of the new creed is essentially no more than the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite, released at long last from the restraints of supernatural sanctions.... Tendencies once universally castigated as moral failings mutate into necessities of social progress. Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information.... Under appropriate euphemisms, greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value.¹⁴

Section 6: The Harm of Materialism to the Earth

The greenhouse gases that are warming the Earth and thereby changing its climate come mainly from the burning of fossil fuels, from deforestation, as well as from unsustainable industrial and agricultural practices, especially in the livestock industry. Vested interests are propagating further exploitation of the Earth and a consumer culture that would support them.

Clearly, human beings must be able to meet their basic needs, and above that perhaps a few other things that will help them to make their life more meaningful and to better contribute to society. But what material things do we really need to live a meaningful life, and what might be luxury? While all human beings are entitled to answer that question for themselves, we know the harmful effects of driving cars and flying, of eating meat

(especially beef and lamb) and the environmental costs of all the things we are buying, not the least clothing – fast fashion! – and electronics. We can ask ourselves what Baha'u'llah meant when He warned the “Kings of the Earth”:

Overstep not the bounds of moderation, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their needs, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit unto them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice.¹⁵

Bahá'ulláh wrote about our complacent and self-satisfied attitude which can be understood as materialism, and how it affects the Earth:

... ye walk on My earth complacent and self-satisfied, heedless that My earth is weary of you and everything within it shunneth you.¹⁶

The Universal House of Justice points to the danger of materialism for the natural environment:

At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day.¹⁷

In a statement on poverty, the Baha'i International Community explains the cost of economic prosperity to our natural environment and emphasizes how important it is to link environmental issues to social and economic priorities:

It has been widely acknowledged that economic prosperity has come at a tremendous cost to our natural environment. In fact, no country has emerged as a major industrial power without a legacy of significant environmental damage, affecting the security and well-being of its own populations and, equally significantly, those of developing nations. The growth-driven economic paradigm rooted in national interests at the expense of social and environmental variables and international well-being is under increasing scrutiny. Challenging ethical questions of resource distribution and responsibility for damages force governments to develop institutional mechanisms and implement policies that consider the prosperity and health of the global community and that of future generations.¹⁸

The Baha'i International Community in its statement *One Planet One Habitation* explains the need for a holistic understanding of progress and warns of a materialistic mindset that pervades society:

Crafting a more holistic conception of progress will require an expanded understanding of ourselves as a species, including truths about the human spirit itself. The planet, its peoples, and creatures have suffered tremendously from a

*materialistic mindset that views the individual as a purely self-interested economic unit, competing with others to accumulate an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. This caricature has largely been rejected at the level of formal theory as simplistic and crude. Many aspects of the global order still rest on these assumptions, however, and often reinforce and deepen them.*¹⁹

The Universal House of Justice explains that materialistic assumptions can creep in anywhere, even into our personal and community lives:

*The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and all Bahá'ís recognize that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world.*²⁰

In the same letter, the Universal House of Justice Letter reminds us of the moral implications of all our actions:

*Every choice a Baha'i makes ... leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims.*²¹

We can conclude that we need a spiritual transformation that encompasses the individual, the community, as well as local, national, and international institutions, and the business sector.

Baha'u'llah wrote:

*... is not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?*²²

REFERENCES

¹ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh CXXVIII, www.bahai.org/r/155228598

² 'Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 42

³ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 143

⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith* www.bahai.org/r/000331358

⁵ Universal House of Justice, October 1985 – *To the Peoples of the World* www.bahai.org/r/434890667

⁶ 1 November 2022 - To the Followers of Bahá'u'lláh in the Democratic Republic of the Congo www.bahai.org/r/518941643

⁷ Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, www.bahai.org/r/333528334

⁸ Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, www.bahai.org/r/042388414

⁹ Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, www.bahai.org/r/549730774

¹⁰ Universal House of Justice, 2 April 2010

¹¹ Letter of the UHJ to the Baha'is in Iran, March 2, 2013

¹² Tablets of Baha'u'llah, *Lawh-i-Hikmat*, p. 144

¹³ Baha'u'llah, *Suriy-i-Muluk*, *Summons* p. 193

¹⁴ Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, 2005, p. 10

-
- ¹⁵ Baha'u'llah, The Summons of the Lord of Hosts, www.bahai.org/r/853800158
- ¹⁶ Baha'u'llah, Persian Hidden Words, No. 20
- ¹⁷ Universal House of Justice Letter on Economic Life, 1 March 2017
- ¹⁸ Eradicating Poverty: Moving Forward as One, The Baha'i International Community's Statement on Poverty, 14 February 2008
- ¹⁹ One Planet, One Habitation - A Bahá'í Perspective on Recasting Humanity's Relationship with the Natural World, 1 June 2022, A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community, #20 https://www.iefworld.org/2022bic_OPOH
- ²⁰ Universal House of Justice Letter on Economic Life, 1 March 2017
- ²¹ Universal House of Justice, 1 March 2017
- ²² Kitáb-i-Íqán, page 240, par 272 <http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/b/KI/ki-8.html>