

Materialism and the Coming Flood

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The sea of materialism is at flood tide and all the nations of the world are immersed in it.
– Abdu’l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 138.

At the bottom of our planet, down there where the penguins live in Antarctica, the ice is melting. Fast.

In Greenland, at the top of the planet, it’s melting even faster.

If Antarctica’s ice melts, along with Greenland’s, it will flood the world, submerging most of humanity’s great coastal cities under the waves.

Why? Well, the ice is mighty deep in Antarctica—more than a mile deep in most places. About seventy percent—yes, that’s right, seven-zero percent, 70%—of the world’s fresh water is locked up in Antarctica’s frozen mass of ice.

Here’s how it all works: the Earth has two “ice sheets”—huge continental-sized glaciers that cover entire landmasses. The world’s smaller ice sheet covers most of Greenland (1.7 million square kilometers, or 660,000 square miles). The biggest planetary ice sheet covers Antarctica (14 million square kilometers, or 5.4 million square miles—about the size of the United States and Mexico, combined). Together, they hold the vast majority—more than 95%—of the world’s fresh water, frozen in that deep blue ice.

If it all melts—Antarctica and Greenland both—sea levels will rise 216 feet, or almost 70 meters.



That would create a true global catastrophe. It would displace much of the world's population, since about half of all humans now live within 37 miles (60 kilometers) of the sea. All low-lying, ocean-adjacent areas of the world would be inundated. Three-quarters of the world's major cities sit on the coastlines of an ocean; so goodbye New York, Sydney, Los Angeles, Hong Kong, Shanghai, London, Kolkata, Bangkok, Tokyo, Miami, etc., etc. Want to see what a post-ice sheet world would look like? National Geographic has an interactive map.

Why do I raise this frightening issue? Because a very important new study, just released in February of 2016 by the U.S. National Academy of Sciences, concluded that sea levels could rise by 4 to 6 feet during this century—wiping out coastal cities and driving millions of climate refugees inland.

Basically, this new research study says that we have previously underestimated the speed, the effects and the impact of climate change-caused sea level increases. Rather than taking centuries to unfold, the collapse of the world's ice sheets could happen in a matter of decades.

The scientists who conducted the study found that some serious sea level rise and flooding events will definitely occur, no matter what. Even if we dramatically slow the pollution of our atmosphere by burning fewer fossil fuels, the heat already trapped in our oceans and our air will cause sea levels to increase, and coastal flooding to become much more common. However, if the world's nations can follow the international Paris Accords on climate, and keep our global temperature rise below 2 degrees Centigrade (3.8 degrees Fahrenheit), sea levels could still rise anywhere from a minimum of 9 inches to 2 feet by the year 2100. But if we fail to adhere to the Paris Accords, the study found, sea levels will rise by more than four feet, and up to as much as six feet. That will make many low-lying coastal cities uninhabitable. If you've been thinking about buying a beach house, don't.

What will make the difference between a problematic but relatively livable sea level rise of 9 inches, and a much more catastrophic rise of 4-6 feet? In a word—consumption.

That vast range of potential sea level rises, which our children and our grandchildren will inherit from us, will depend on our consumption of fossil fuels, food and material goods. If we continue to consume those things in the same way we have in the past, we will flood the planet's shores. If we mitigate and reduce our consumption, by converting to renewable energy sources, eating less wasteful and more moderate plant-based diets and finding ways to control our runaway, materialistic habits as consumers, we still have a chance of averting the drowning of the world's great cities.

Perhaps Abdu'l-Baha had these future conditions in mind when he said "The sea of materialism is at flood tide and all the nations of the world are immersed in it."

The Baha'i teachings, and all the great Faiths before, have long called for an end to such materialism:

All the Prophets have come to promote divine bestowals, to found the spiritual civilization and teach the principles of morality. Therefore, we must strive with all our powers so that spiritual influences may gain the victory. For material forces have attacked mankind. The world of humanity is submerged in a sea of materialism. The rays of the Sun of Reality are seen but dimly and darkly through opaque glasses. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 12.

So in this short series of essays, we'll explore what materialism has to do with our rising seas; and how we can keep them both from engulfing us.