

Rooting Out the Corruption in our Economic Systems

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...there must be a solution of social problems and economic questions based on justice to all... – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 6, p. 314.

In his recent encyclical on poverty and the environment called *Laudato Si'*, the Pope frequently refers to problems of corruption:

When the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided. (§123)

The encyclical criticizes how the method and aims of science and technology are made an epistemological paradigm, with a reductionism in which technological products create a framework that ends up conditioning lifestyles and shaping social possibilities along the lines dictated by the interests of certain powerful groups. The technological paradigm has become so dominant that it would be difficult to do without its resources and even more difficult to utilize them without being dominated by their internal logic. Technological specialization makes it difficult to see the larger picture:

The fragmentation of knowledge proves helpful for concrete applications, but it often leads to a gradual loss of appreciation for the whole, for the relationships between things, and for the broader horizon,

which then becomes irrelevant. This very fact makes it hard to find adequate ways of solving the more complex problems of today's world, particularly those regarding the environment and the poor; these problems cannot be dealt with from a single perspective or from a single set of interests. A science which would offer solutions to the great issues would necessarily have to take into account the data generated by other fields of knowledge, including philosophy and social ethics. (§110)

This reference to a science of “great issues” mirrors the calls in the scientific community for a new sustainability science integrated across all disciplines. It also mirrors the Baha'i teachings of the essential agreement and needed balance between science and religion:

Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond. Religious teaching which is at variance with science and reason is human invention and imagination unworthy of acceptance, for the antithesis and opposite of knowledge is superstition born of the ignorance of man. If we say religion is opposed to science, we lack knowledge of either true science or true religion, for both are founded upon the premises and conclusions of reason, and both must bear its test.
– Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 104.

The Pope's broad critique of corruption extends to the economic system, and the easy acceptance of:

...the idea of infinite or unlimited growth, which proves so attractive to economists, financiers and experts in technology. It is based on the lie that there is an infinite supply of the earth's goods, and this leads to the planet being squeezed dry beyond every limit. (§106)

The absolute power of the financial system will only give rise to new crises, the Pope says:

The financial crisis of 2007-08 provided an opportunity to develop a new economy, more attentive to ethical principles, and new ways of regulating speculative financial practices and virtual wealth. But the response to the crisis did not include rethinking the outdated criteria which continue to rule the world. (§189)

The technocratic paradigm also tends to dominate economics and political life. The economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit, without concern for its potential negative impact on human beings. Finance overwhelms the real economy. The lessons of the global financial crisis have not been assimilated, and we are learning all too slowly the lessons of environmental deterioration.... showing no interest in more balanced levels of production, a better distribution of wealth, concern for the environment and the rights of future generations.... We fail to see the deepest roots of our present failures, which have to do with the direction, goals, meaning and social implications of technological and economic growth. (§109)

As a consequence, Doomsday predictions can no longer be met with irony or disdain. We may well be leaving to coming generations debris, desolation and filth. The pace of consumption, waste and environmental change has so stretched the planet's capacity that our contemporary lifestyle, unsustainable as it is, can only precipitate catastrophes, such as those which even now periodically occur in different areas of the world. The effects of the present imbalance can only be reduced by our decisive action, here and now. We need to reflect on our accountability before those who will have to endure their dire consequences. (§161)

The Baha'i teachings agree, and call for a spiritual solution to economic crisis and corruption:

No religious books of the past prophets speak of the economic question, while this problem has been thoroughly solved in the teachings of Baha'u'llah. Certain regulations are revealed which insure the welfare and well being of all humanity. Just as the rich man enjoys his rest and his pleasures surrounded by luxuries, the poor man must likewise have a home, be provided with sustenance, and not be in want. Until this is effected happiness is impossible. All are equal in the estimation of God; their rights are one and there is no distinction for any soul; all are protected beneath the justice of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 6, p. 5.