

Materialism: the Real Opiate of the Masses

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Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, was scathing in his rebuke of religious leaders during the 19th century – who he said actually “hindered the people” from salvation. After being tortured, repeatedly exiled, and imprisoned by the clerics of his time merely for teaching his new Faith, Baha'u'llah wrote:

Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people.

Over the past two centuries, a particular anti-religion movement has gradually gathered steam in many parts of the world. Repulsed by the depths of ignorance, corruption, and depravity into which organized religion had been dragged by the self-serving, power-hungry conduct of its supposed leaders, and set increasingly free of the shackles that had bound it since the dawn of time by growing levels of literacy, education, post-Renaissance scientific discovery, and decentralization of power, the generality of humankind has slowly but surely moved towards an approach to life that tends to compartmentalize its spiritual and material elements into separate parts.

Is this a good thing?

The continued hijacking of divine guidance for selfish political purposes over the last century has only further led to the world we live in today, which tends to view religion as archaic, out of touch, and seeking to control its adherents solely through keeping them ignorant and fearful of eternal damnation.

The motive force for the birth and continued sustenance of this materialistic anti-religious movement can easily be understood – but has it now driven humanity to the other extreme, where the decoupled material and secular element of life is deprived of the redeeming and moderating influence of the spirit, making materialism an ever more dominant facet of human existence?

Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith wrote:

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 Baha'u'llah 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 ...

Many people today lament the fact that materialism has become such a dominant facet of modern life, but cancerous? Contaminating? Devouring flame? Surely it's not as bad as all that?

I'd like to say from personal experience that it is. Born and raised in a middle class family, my siblings and I were never short of the basic necessities of life – but it definitely was not a life of luxury, or excess. Being born and raised in a Baha'i family, I felt quite happy with this kind of relatively modest life, always remembering Baha'u'llah's warning: **“O Son of Being! Busy not thyself with this world, for with fire We test the gold and with gold We test Our servants.”** After my childhood I went to a university, studied engineering, got a job, and started making money. My career accelerated as I climbed the corporate ladder. I still voluntarily contributed to the Baha'i Fund, still tried to help others when I could through charities and personal financial assistance, but my lifestyle was definitely getting more and more comfortable – OK, much more than comfortable, and I found myself acquiring more things. While I tried to stay engaged in the activities of the Baha'i community, work was taking up more time, and increasingly defined who I was.

Until one day, someone asked me a rather innocuous question, something that I had been asked quite a few times, really: “Where do you see yourself in 10 years?” To which I gave my stock answer, one that I had given countless times: “CEO of a multinational organization.” But there

was a follow- up question, and this really floored me: “And that will make you happy?”

At that moment it dawned on me that this invisible, addictive drug of materialism had entrapped me firmly within its “ominous tentacles,” without me even realizing it! I was like a hamster on a wheel, running, and running, not really sure why, but too drugged to stop and think. I should have known better, with admonitions from the earliest moments of my life about the enervating

effect of materialism. I tried to make sense of it, tried to figure out where it had all gone wrong, and what I came up with was truly chilling.

We are bombarded daily, hourly, at every instant, with a narrative that the purpose of life is to progress materially and acquire more and more substance, wealth, comfort, position. We are told that the people who have “made it” are the rich and famous, the sports icons, the movie stars. We are assured that the pursuit of happiness must be through bigger and better-paying jobs and businesses. We are convinced that we need to invest in the companies that return the most, because this leads to personal enrichment, which is essential to living a good life. We are brainwashed that the only path for national advancement is for our country to exploit as much of our own (and if possible others’) natural resources as possible, and to make sure our nation’s citizens live as prosperously as possible. Few ever take this train of thought to the next logical question: What about everyone else?

Even when it’s not overtly about money, we are preached to that doing what “makes you happy” (read: more expensive possessions, luxury vacations, extreme sports, self-beautification, “letting loose”) is indispensable to leading a fulfilled life.

This well-honed, seductive narrative, while paying lip service to the spiritual aspect of the human being, almost completely negates that self-same aspect in the way of life it advocates. It feeds on itself and grows like a hydra. It finds willing as well as unwilling and oftentimes unknowing victims in all strata of society. It works on us insidiously, and many go to their graves not even realizing that they have wandered through life in a drug-induced haze, believing to be real what was only a temporary, temporal mirage. Baha’u’llah warned:

The days of your life are far spent, O people, and your end is fast approaching. Put away, therefore, the things ye have devised and to which ye cleave, and take firm hold on the precepts of God, that haply ye may attain that which He hath purposed for you, and be of them that pursue a right course. Delight not yourselves in the things of the world and its vain ornaments, neither set your hopes on them. Let your reliance be on the remembrance of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Great. He will, ere long, bring to naught all the things ye possess.

To my mind, materialism, truly, is the greatest opiate that exists in the world today. It saps our souls and destroys our civilizations, as individuals, corporations, and nations race each other to try and accumulate for themselves an ever-increasing share of material possessions and resources. It curses our planet by extracting more and more resources and producing more and more unnecessary material goods and creating more and more waste, pollution, and carbon. This materialistic race keeps us in a constantly drugged state, not wanting to face the true promptings and yearnings of our souls.

I feel incredibly blessed that I have now become aware of this menace, this addiction, and have at least been able to contemplate some remedial action to extricate myself from its clutches – but I am reminded that I can very easily slip back into its grasp if I don’t constantly, daily, try to realign myself with my Creator and His will for me. As Baha’u’llah advised us all:

Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust. Wherefore, O My servants, defile not your wings with the clay of waywardness and vain desires ...