

Materialism Q and A

Susan Gammage

What do the Bahá'í Writings say about materialism?

I earnestly exhort you: let not your hearts be fettered by the material things of this world; I charge you not to lie contentedly on the beds of negligence, prisoners of matter, but to arise and free yourselves from its chains! (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 37)

O ye loved ones of God! Know ye that the world is even as a mirage rising over the sands, that the thirsty mistaketh for water. The wine of this world is but a vapour in the desert, its pity and compassion but toil and trouble, the repose it proffereth only weariness and sorrow. Abandon it to those who belong to it. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 186)

Parallel with this, and pervading all departments of life—an evil which the nation, and indeed all those within the capitalist system, though to a lesser degree, share with that state and its satellites regarded as the sworn enemies of that system—is 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. (Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith, pp. 124-125)

Why is materialism bad for us?

Material favors sometimes deprive us of spiritual favors and material rest of spiritual rest. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Divine Philosophy, p. 135-136)

It is clear that whatever glory is gained outside the Cause of God turns to abasement at the end; and ease and comfort not met with on the path of God are finally but care and sorrow; and all such wealth is penury, and nothing more. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Memorials of the Faithful, p. 4)

You see all round you proofs of the inadequacy of material things — how joy, comfort, peace and consolation are not to be found in the transitory things of the world. Is it not then foolishness to refuse to seek these treasures where they may be found? The doors of the spiritual Kingdom are open to all, and without is absolute darkness. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 110)

Inspiring these political, social and economic crises was the inexorable rise and consolidation of a disease of the human soul infinitely more destructive than any of its specific manifestations. Its triumph marked a new and ominous stage in the process of social and spiritual degeneration that Shoghi Effendi had identified. Fatheted by nineteenth century European thought, acquiring enormous influence through the achievements of American capitalist culture, and endowed by Marxism with the counterfeit credibility peculiar to that system, materialism emerged full-blown in the second half of the twentieth century as a kind of universal religion claiming absolute authority in both the personal and social life of humankind. (Universal House of Justice, Century of Light, sections 8.6-8.8)

It must be realized that the isolation and despair from which so many suffer are products of an environment ruled by an all-pervasive materialism. (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Continental Board of Counselors)

If it [the soul] chooses the material world as a partner, then the child born of that union will be a materialistic way of life which deprives the soul of its spiritual heritage. A great many people in the world allow themselves to fall in love with material things; consequently the soul is impoverished and although it is a spiritual entity, it becomes sullied with worldly affections and gives birth to materialism, an offspring unworthy of its high station. (Adib Taherzadeh, The Covenant of Baha'u'llah, p. 17)

What happens when materialism gains hold?

For a long time the religious world had been weakened and materialism had advanced; the spiritual forces of life were waning, moralities were becoming degraded, composure and peace had vanished from souls, and satanic qualities were dominating hearts; strife and hatred overshadowed humanity, bloodshed and violence prevailed. God was neglected; the Sun of Reality seemed to have gone completely; deprivation of the bounties of heaven was a fact; and so the season of winter fell upon mankind. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 95)

Consider to what a remarkable extent the spirituality of people has been overcome by materialism so that spiritual susceptibility seems to have vanished, divine civilization become decadent, and guidance and knowledge of God no longer remain. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 221)

With the collapse of the Soviet Union, impulses to devise and promote any formal materialistic belief system disappeared. Nor would any useful purpose have been served by such efforts, as materialism was soon facing no significant challenge in most parts of the world. Religion, where not simply driven back into fanaticism and unthinking rejection of progress, became progressively reduced to a kind of personal preference, a predilection, a pursuit designed to satisfy spiritual and emotional needs of the individual. The sense of historical mission that had defined the major Faiths learned to content itself with providing religious endorsement for campaigns of social change carried on by secular movements. The academic world, once the scene of great exploits of the mind and spirit, settled into the role of a kind of scholastic industry preoccupied with tending its machinery of dissertations, symposia, publication credits and grants. Whether as world-view or simple appetite, materialism's effect is to leach out of human motivation — and even interest — the spiritual impulses that distinguish the rational soul. "For self-love," 'Abdu'l-Bahá has said, "is kneaded into the very clay of man, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good." In the absence of conviction about the spiritual nature of reality and the fulfillment it alone offers, it is not surprising to find at the very heart of the current crisis of civilization a cult of individualism that increasingly admits of no restraint and that elevates acquisition and personal advancement to the status of major cultural values. The resulting atomization of society has marked a new stage in the process of disintegration about which the writings of Shoghi Effendi speak so urgently. (Universal House of Justice, Century of Light, sections 8.6-8.8)

Tragically, what Bahá'ís see in present-day society is unbridled exploitation of the masses of humanity by greed that excuses itself as the operation of "impersonal market forces". What meets their eyes everywhere is the destruction of moral foundations vital to humanity's future, through gross self-indulgence masquerading as "freedom of speech". What they find themselves struggling against daily is the pressure of a dogmatic materialism, claiming to be the voice of "science", that seeks systematically to exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness. (Universal House of Justice, Century of Light, section 11.21)

How can we tell if we are materialistic?

All are submerged in the sea of materialism. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 221)

Some men's lives are solely occupied with the things of this world; their minds are so circumscribed by exterior manners and traditional interests that they are blind to any other realm of existence, to the spiritual significance of all things! They think and dream of earthly fame, of material progress. Sensuous delights and comfortable surroundings bound their horizon, their highest ambitions centre in successes of worldly conditions and circumstances! They curb not their lower propensities; they eat, drink, and sleep! Like the animal, they have no thought beyond their own physical well-being. It is true that these necessities must be despatched. Life is a load which must be carried on while we are on earth, but the cares of the lower things of life should not be allowed to monopolize all the thoughts and aspirations of a human being. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 98-99)

In cities like New York the people are submerged in the sea of materialism. Their sensibilities are attuned to material forces, their perceptions purely physical. The animal energies predominate in their activities; all their thoughts are directed to material things; day and night they are devoted to the attractions of this world, without aspiration beyond the life that is vanishing and mortal. In schools and temples of learning knowledge of the sciences acquired is based upon material observations only; there is no realization of Divinity in their methods and conclusions — all have reference to the world of matter. They are not interested in attaining knowledge of the mysteries of God or understanding the secrets of the heavenly Kingdom; what they acquire is based altogether upon visible and tangible evidences. Beyond these evidences they are without susceptibilities; they have no idea of the world of inner significances and are utterly out of touch with God, considering this an indication of reasonable attitude and philosophical judgment whereof they are self-sufficient and proud. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 261-262)

Mankind is submerged in the sea of materialism and occupied with the affairs of this world. They have no thought beyond earthly possessions and manifest no desire save the passions of this fleeting, mortal existence. Their utmost purpose is the attainment of material livelihood, physical comforts and worldly enjoyments such as constitute the happiness of the animal world rather than the world of man. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 335)

The people in general are all asleep; they are all inadvertent; they are all slumbering, because their thoughts are confined to materialism; they are not at all thoughtful of God's thoughts. (Compilations, Baha'i Scriptures, p. 372-373)

The gross materialism that engulfs the entire nation at the present hour; the attachment to worldly things that enshrouds the souls of men; the fears and anxieties that distract their minds; the pleasure and dissipations that fill their time, the prejudices and animosities that darken their outlook, the apathy and lethargy that paralyze their spiritual faculties—these are among the formidable obstacles that stand in the path of every would-be warrior in the service of Bahá'u'lláh, obstacles which he must battle against and surmount in his crusade for the redemption of his own countrymen. (Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith, p. 148)

Its creed was simplicity itself. Reality—including human reality and the process by which it evolves — is essentially material in nature. The goal of human life is, or ought to be, the satisfaction of material needs and wants. Society exists to facilitate this quest, and the collective concern of humankind should be an ongoing refinement of the system, aimed at rendering it ever more efficient in carrying out its assigned task. (Universal House of Justice, Century of Light, sections 8.6-8.8)

One of the signs of a decadent society, a sign which is very evident in the world today, is an almost frenetic devotion to pleasure and diversion, an insatiable thirst for amusement, a fanatical devotion to games and sport, a reluctance to treat any matter seriously, and a scornful, derisory attitude towards virtue and solid worth. (The Universal House of Justice, 1997 Jan 12, The Humourist, p. 2-3)

What causes materialism to flourish?

Imitation destroys the foundation of religion, extinguishes the spirituality of the human world, transforms heavenly illumination into darkness and deprives man of the knowledge of God. It is the cause of the victory of materialism and infidelity over religion; it is the denial of Divinity and the law of revelation; it refuses Prophethood and rejects the Kingdom of God. When materialists subject imitations to the intellectual analysis of reason, they find them to be mere superstitions; therefore, they deny religion. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 161)

How should we regard our earthly possessions?

Fear thou God and pride not thyself on thine earthly possessions . . . (The Báb, Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 19)

I feel happy when I achieve success. Is that wrong?

Material progress insures the happiness of the human world. Spiritual progress insures the happiness and eternal continuance of the soul. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Baha'i World Faith, p. 227)

I like being able to provide for myself and my family.

Pride not thyself on thine earthly possessions, inasmuch as what God doth possess is better for them . . . (The Báb, Selections from the Writings of the Báb, p. 19)

How did it happen that we became more attached to the material world and not to the spiritual?

Therefore the realm of the religionist has gradually narrowed and darkened and the sphere of the materialist has widened and advanced; for the religionist has held to imitation and counterfeit, neglecting and discarding holiness and the sacred reality of religion. When the sun sets it is the time for bats to fly. They come forth because they are creatures of the night. When the lights of religion become darkened the materialists appear. They are the bats of night. The decline of religion is their time of activity; they seek the shadows when the world is darkened and clouds have spread over it. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations of World Unity, p. 71)

What can I do to get back to the spiritual world when this happens?

Wherefore, O My servants, defile not your wings with the clay of waywardness and vain desires, and suffer them not to be stained with the dust of envy and hate, that ye may not be hindered from soaring in the heavens of My divine knowledge. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words Persian 26)

What should be done instead?

The heart's ambitions should ascend to a more glorious goal, mental activity should rise to higher levels! Men should hold in their souls the vision of celestial perfection, and there prepare a dwelling-place for the inexhaustible bounty of the Divine Spirit. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 98-99)

If we are imprisoned in the material world, our spirit can soar into the Heavens and we shall be free indeed! (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 110)

If material anxiety envelops you in a dark cloud, spiritual radiance lightens your path. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 111)

Jesus declares that there is spiritual capacity in some people, for all are not submerged in the sea of materialism. They seek the Divine Spirit; they turn to God; they long for the Kingdom. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 104)

Turn your faces unto the Kingdom of your Lord the All-Merciful (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 186)

Approach not those who are drowned in the sea of this world, but rather be enkindled by the fire of the love of God. ('Abdul-Bahá, Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, VI, p. 74)

Pass by whatever exists in this world, and find Me. (Compilations, Baha'i Scriptures, p. 132)

It demands daily vigilance in the control of one's carnal desires and corrupt inclinations. It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. (Shoghi Effendi: The Advent of Divine Justice, p. 30)

But we must persevere and do our best knowing this is our duty and that conditions will eventually change completely and follow Bahá'u'lláh's Pattern. (Shoghi Effendi, High Endeavours – Messages to Alaska, p. 49)

Yet another sacred duty is that of clinging to the cord of moderation in all things. (The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 437)

And in this the friends must understand the ramifications of Bahá'u'lláh's statement that "the present-day order" must "be rolled up, and a new one spread out in its stead." (Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010 to the Continental Board of Counselors)

The Hidden Words can exert a potent influence in freeing man from the fetters of materialism and enabling him to win the battle against his own self. (Adib Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Baha'u'llah v 1, p. 76)

It's easy to get caught up in behaving like those around us:

Beware that the clamor of them that have repudiated this Most Great Announcement shall not deter thee from achieving thy purpose. (Baha'u'llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p. 307)

I try to draw closer to God and away from the things of the material world, but I keep getting drawn back in. Why is that?

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. (Bahá'u'lláh, Hidden Words Persian 26)

There is such a confusion in the world today, so much uncertainty, so much materialism, that it is very hard to hold the attention of even the more spiritually minded people. (Shoghi Effendi, High Endeavours – Messages to Alaska, p. 49)

Because of such an attitude, and also because of our refusal to become involved in politics, Bahá'is are often accused of holding aloof from the "real problems" of their fellowmen. But when we hear this accusation let us not forget that those who make it are usually idealistic materialists to whom material good is the only "real" good, whereas we know that the working of the material world is merely a reflection of spiritual conditions and until the spiritual conditions can be changed there can be no lasting change for the better in material affairs. (The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 283)

What happens if we can avoid materialism?

. . . His grace and bounty may cast their dawning splendours over you, and a heavenly table may be sent down for you, and your Lord may bless you, and shower His riches upon you to gladden your bosoms and fill your hearts with bliss, to attract your minds, and cleanse your souls, and console your eyes. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 186)

They are not at all thoughtful of God's thoughts except you, who are thinking of God. Verily, you are the spirit of the world! You are the cause of the light of the world! You are the salt of the earth! (Compilations, Baha'i Scriptures, p. 372-373)

What are the consequences of not turning back?

. . . they who are to be the essence of detachment and moderation be deluded by the trappings of this nether world or set their hearts on its adornments and waste their lives. (The Universal House of Justice, Messages 1963 to 1986, p. 437)

If the people of the world persist, as they seem to be doing, in their blind materialism, they must bear the consequences in a prolongation of their present condition, and even a worsening of it. (Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 113)

Do I have to turn my back on the material world entirely?

Material civilization is like the body and spiritual civilization is like the soul. Body without soul cannot live. (Abdu'l-Bahá, Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 30)

How do materialism and spirituality work together?

As material and physical sciences are taught here and are constantly unfolding in wider vistas of attainment, I am hopeful that spiritual development may also follow and keep pace with these outer advantages. As material knowledge is illuminating those within the walls of this great temple of learning, so also may the light of the spirit, the inner and divine light of the real philosophy glorify this institution. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 30-31)

It is my hope that these revered people present may attain both material and spiritual progress. As they have advanced wonderfully in material degrees, so may they, likewise, advance in spiritual development until the body shall become refined and beautiful through the wealth of spiritual potentiality and efficiency. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 104)

Material civilization is likened to the body, whereas divine civilization is the spirit in that body. A body not manifesting the spirit is dead; a fruitless tree is worthless. (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 104)

Is there a new way of thinking about materialism?

It is in the context of raising the level of human capacity through the expansion of knowledge at all levels that the economic issues facing humankind need to be addressed. As the experience of recent decades has demonstrated, material benefits and endeavors cannot be regarded as ends in themselves. Their value consists not only in providing for humanity's basic needs in housing, food, health care, and the like, but in extending the reach of human abilities. The most important role that economic efforts must play in development lies, therefore, in equipping people and institutions with the means through which they can achieve the real purpose of development: that is, laying foundations for a new social order that can cultivate the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness. The challenge to economic thinking is to accept unambiguously this purpose of development—and its own role in fostering creation of the means to achieve it. Only in this way can economics and the related sciences free themselves from the undertow of the materialistic preoccupations that now distract them, and fulfill their potential as tools vital to achieving human well-being in the full sense of the term. Nowhere is the need for a rigorous dialogue between the work of science and the insights of religion more apparent. (Baha'i International Community, 1995 Mar 03, The Prosperity of Humankind)

All the signs of the times indicate that we are at the dawn of a new era in the history of mankind. Hitherto the young eagle of humanity has clung to the old aerie in the solid rock of selfishness and materialism. Its attempts to use its wings have been timid and tentative. It has had restless longings for something still unattained. More and more it has been chafing in the confinement of the old dogmas and orthodoxies. But now the era of confinement is at an end, and it can launch on the wings of faith and reason into the higher realms of spiritual love and truth. It will no longer be earthbound as it was before its wings had grown, but will soar at will to the regions of wide outlook and glorious freedom. One thing is necessary, however, if its flight is to be sure and steady. Its wings must not only be strong, but they must act in perfect harmony and coordination. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá says: — "It cannot fly with one wing alone. If it tries to fly with the wing of religion alone it will land in the slough of superstition, and if it tries to fly with the wing of science alone it will end in the dreary bog of materialism. (Dr. J.E. Esslemont, Baha'u'llah and the New Era, p. 209-210)

About The Author

Susan Gammage is a Bahá'í-inspired author, educator and researcher with a passion for finding ways to help people apply Bahá'í principles to everyday life situations so they can learn to "live the life". She has published hundreds of articles and many books and nothing gives her greater pleasure than working on a whole lot more. She is blessed to be able to live in one of the most beautiful parts of Canada.

To hire her as a life coach: <https://susangammage.com/shop> or to contribute to the costs of developing and maintaining the site:

<https://susangammage.com/product-category/donations>