

Wealth, Poverty and Spirituality

Matt Giani



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As an individual fortunate enough to have been raised with both the material comforts of the United States as well as the spiritual teachings of the Baha’i Faith, I often think about the relationship between wealth, poverty, and spirituality.

A number of questions naturally arise when considering this: Are wealth and material development important, or simply a distraction from spiritual development? Is it wrong for me to enjoy physical comfort and material prosperity? Is choosing to renounce the material advancement of the West, for example, by moving to a less developed part of the world a noble sacrifice or an unnecessary infliction of physical suffering upon oneself?

Throughout the history of religion, wealth and spirituality have often appeared to be in conflict with one another. One of the most well known Christian verses supporting this notion is Jesus Christ’s aphorism that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matthew 19:24, King James Bible).

This sentiment is similarly echoed by Baha'u'llah, the prophet-founder of the Baha'i Faith, in His collection of short spiritual maxims and statements known as the Hidden Words.

Baha'u'llah declares, unambiguously:

O ye that pride yourselves on mortal riches! Know ye in truth that wealth is a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire, the lover and his beloved. The rich, but for a few, shall in no wise attain the court of His presence nor enter the city of content and resignation. [Persian Hidden Words, no. 53](#)

In the estimation of the Messengers of God, material poverty is often described as a blessing rather than a curse. Christ famously prophesized that the “meek” would be the ones to inherit the earth.

The following passage from Baha'u'llah, once again taken from the Hidden Words, is telling:

Be not troubled in poverty nor confident in riches, for poverty is followed by riches, and riches are followed by poverty. Yet to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift, belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God. [Persian Hidden Words, no. 51](#) (Emphasis added)

When initially studying the teachings of the various religions, it may in fact appear that wealth is to be avoided while poverty is to be embraced. However, while the teachings of Baha'u'llah, Christ, and many of the other Messengers of God are remarkably similar on this subject, the Baha'i Faith also teaches that the interpretation and application of these teachings need to be revised given the exigencies of the current age.

In former religious dispensations, the mark of spirituality was often the complete renunciation of the physical world, which at times took the form of exclusion, isolation, and physical deprivation. However, the Baha'i Faith in fact discourages such monasticism and asceticism.

“Living in seclusion or practising asceticism is not acceptable in the presence of God,” Baha'u'llah asserts. The reason given for this prohibition is twofold.

First, such seclusion prevents individuals from pursuing a craft or profession that benefits the rest of humanity. In the Baha'i Faith, all individuals are strongly encouraged to “obtain a livelihood by sweat of the brow and bodily exertion” (Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 186) and work is described as a sacred act of worship on the same plane as prayer and meditation – at least if it is performed in a spirit of sacrifice.

But perhaps even more interesting, given the previous quotations regarding wealth and poverty, is the second reason Baha'u'llah forbids such extreme forms of self-deprivation.

Baha'u'llah states:

Should a man wish to adorn himself with the ornaments of the earth, to wear its apparels, or partake of the benefits it can bestow, no harm can befall him.... Eat ye, O people, of the good things which God hath allowed you, and deprive not yourselves from His wondrous bounties. Render thanks and praise unto Him, and be of them that are truly thankful. [Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah](#)

In some respects, these two concepts may appear to be somewhat contradictory.

Why would Baha'u'llah warn of the dangers of wealth and praise the benefits of poverty on the one hand while encouraging us to “adorn [ourselves] with the ornaments of the earth” on the

other? If poverty is a blessing, why would Baha'u'llah prohibit us from the extreme forms of self-renunciation commonly practiced by the pious of former religious dispensations?

From my perspective, this apparent paradox can be most easily resolved by considering whether wealth is being treated as a means or simply an end. While Baha'u'llah repeatedly warns of the dangers of wealth, it is not material luxury itself that is inherently dangerous, but rather the attachment to and pursuit of wealth as a primary purpose of existence.

In the above quote from Baha'u'llah, in which He sanctions the enjoyment of all the material pleasures this world has to offer, He places one important caveat upon this statement: one may take full advantage of the benefits of this physical world “if he alloweth nothing whatever to intervene between him and God.”

Although this distinction is often lost in discussions of wealth, particularly in the West, this concept has long been a central principle of Buddhism.

E. F. Schumacher, a well known researcher and theorist who has written extensively on the principles of “Buddhist Economics,” summarizes this perspective nicely: “It is not wealth that stands in the way of liberation but the attachment to wealth; not the enjoyment of pleasurable things but the craving for them.”

‘Abdu'l-Baha’, the eldest son of Baha'u'llah, synthesizes much of the previous quotations in the following statement:

It should not be imagined that the writer's earlier remarks constitute a denunciation of wealth or a commendation of poverty. Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. [The Secret of Divine Civilization](#)

With these teachings in mind, we can see that there is nothing inherently wrong with material prosperity. However, there is one more point regarding the Baha'i Faith's teachings on wealth that should be noted.

One of the central principles of the Baha'i Faith is that the world is currently in a state of disequilibrium, particularly in regards to wealth. Thus, as ‘Abdu'l-Baha's above quote alludes to, one of the most urgent tasks for Baha'is is to devise ways to more justly and equitably distribute resources among all of humanity. We must not only be detached from wealth and material comforts, but also strive to help all of humanity meet their physical needs and reduce the deleterious effects of poverty.

If we were to try and summarize all of these teachings in a few points, they would therefore go something like this:

1. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the benefits of this material existence.
2. However, wealth can be one of the greatest hindrances to spiritual growth and, particularly for those of us blessed with material prosperity, we must ever be mindful of our tendency to become attached to luxuries and physical comfort.

3. While there is nothing inherently wrong with wealth, the extreme inequalities of wealth and poverty are detrimental to the spiritual and social development of humanity.
4. The Baha'i Faith is actively working toward ensuring the just and fruitful distribution of wealth and resources for the enjoyment of all of humanity.

What are your thoughts on how to strike the right balance in your own lives, and on the efforts to achieve economic justice on a global level? We'd love to hear from you in the comments!

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About the Author



Matt Giani is a research scientist at the University of Texas at Austin. His research focuses on stratification and social mobility in education, with an emphasis on helping underprivileged students make successful transitions to college after high school. Matt draws his inspiration from his exuberant daughter Clara, his incredible wife Shadi, and the Baha'i teachings.