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How to Stop Civilization's Excesses

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Human civilization has come a long way in a very, very short time.

It's hard to see without a historical perspective, but the past 200 years or so have vaulted our civilization from thousands of years of pretty-much-the-same to revolutionary changes coming so fast we can barely deal with or understand them. From horse and buggy to hundreds of horsepower in every car; from the abacus to the calculator to computers of all sizes; from rudimentary communication devices like the telegraph and the telegram to 4.77 billion cellphones in use in 2017, we've rocketed to a new plateau of sophistication and technological advancement that our grandparents couldn't have dreamed of.

Civilization and technology are humming along in tandem, and not stopping for anyone, any government or any entity. This "hum" of progress, we should never forget, depends on peaceful coexistence, sufficient food and water for all, and the scientific and social freedom to experiment.

That's the dictionary definition of civilization: the stage of human social development and organization that is considered most advanced. But the benefits of an "advanced" material and technological civilization can easily be disputed—they're certainly not all good. Traditionalists can and do question those benefits. Native and tribal peoples can and do. Ancient cultures and religions can and do.

The Baha'i teachings do, too:

All around us today we see how man surrounds himself with every modern convenience and luxury, and denies nothing to the physical and material side of his nature. But, take heed, lest in thinking too earnestly of the things of the body you forget the things of the soul: for material advantages do not elevate the spirit of a man. Perfection in worldly things is a joy to the body of a man but in no wise does it glorify his soul.

It may be that a man who has every material benefit, and who lives surrounded by all the greatest comfort modern civilization can give him, is denied the all important gift of the Holy Spirit.

It is indeed a good and praiseworthy thing to progress materially, but in so doing, let us not neglect the more important spiritual progress, and close our eyes to the Divine light shining in our midst. – Abdu'l-Baha, Paris Talks, pp. 62-63.

However, as a society, if we are set, or stuck in our old ways and refuse to change and adapt to new realities, we will soon be left behind, and our culture will gradually die. Our youth, attracted by the lures of technology and modern living, move out of local communities to live and work elsewhere, often returning infrequently, frustrated with elders who will not concede new realities and new relationships.

But as history has shown, “civilization” as carried out by many leaders and countries and peoples, has proven to be a prolific source of evil as much as it has for good. The Baha’iwritings explain it:

Whoso cleaveth to justice, can, under no circumstances, transgress the limits of moderation. He discerneth the truth in all things, through the guidance of Him Who is the All-Seeing. The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error. – Baha’u’llah, Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah, p. 342.

This only makes common sense. As history has shown through the subjugation of peoples and cultures by devouring nations and armies, colonization and the “civilizing processes” can be extremely destructive. Today, when nations seek economic domination, this too can become a prolific source of evil. Price fixing, price gouging, corruption, inequality and unfairness also destroys peoples and cultures, taking away their own chances to sustain and better themselves.

Even the touted foreign aid given by wealthy countries to needy countries sometimes has strings attached, such as buying machines, equipment, products and services only from the donor nation. Instead of strict oversight mechanisms on spending, in other cases huge sums of money are given to prop up so-called friendly governments in the hopes of obtaining economic concessions and markets in the future.

Yet progress we must, or stagnate and die on the vine. Baha’is believe that the only lasting way to solve these inequalities, and to regulate the excesses of material civilization, is to turn to and embrace the message of God for this day:

Baha’u’llah taught that hearts must receive the Bounty of the Holy Spirit, so that Spiritual civilization may be established. For material civilization is not adequate for the needs of mankind and cannot be the cause of its happiness. Material civilization is like the body and spiritual civilization is like the soul. Body without soul cannot live. – Abdu'l-Baha, Abdu'l-Baha in London, p. 29.

