



BAHA TEACHINGS.ORGTM
...Baha'i Inspired Perspectives

Spirituality: The Surprising Solution to Our Economic Problems

Badi Shams

Everyone knows we have bodies—but many aren't so sure about the existence of the soul.

Of course, the body has needs—food, clothing, shelter, health care—and it has traditionally been the job of economics to satisfy those needs.

Consider this, though: what if the soul and the body are both equally valid realities? Even further, what if the soul lives eternally? If that's true, shouldn't we prioritize the eternal needs of the soul over the temporary needs of the body—or at least make them equal in importance?

With these assumptions, the needs of the soul do become a priority. The body's role—to support the soul by living longer in a healthy manner so the soul gets the chance of achieving more in this lifetime—means we can't ignore our bodies. We need to take care of them because the body supports the soul; it is the temple of the soul. This basic assumption, from a Baha'i perspective, needs to underpin all economic systems:

The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Few societies have dealt effectively with this situation. The solution calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made. It is an issue that is bound up not only with the necessity for eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty but also with those spiritual verities the understanding of which can produce a new universal attitude. Fostering such an attitude is itself a major part of the solution. – The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, pp. 10-11.

Adam Smith, considered the father of modern economics, also made some basic assumptions in order to provide more goods for man's needs. Based on his observations, Smith built his theoretical economic system. One of the assumptions he made was that man always acts in his own interests and wants to maximize his satisfaction, so he believed that unfettered self-interest in free-market economies leads to economic prosperity.

The other assumptions Smith mentioned in his famous book *The Wealth of Nations* included the use of the term “invisible hand,” a metaphor to describe the self-regulation of capitalist markets. He also advocated “laissez-faire economics,” which meant that governments should not interfere and economic markets

should be left alone to take care of any problems. He expounded upon how rational self-interest and competition can lead to economic prosperity.

These two fundamental principles of the economic system introduced by Adam Smith were adopted by other economists. The principle of maximizing satisfaction created a sense of individualism which was praised and was the source of inspiration for many. But this trend of economic thought, without any interference from governments or other agencies, created a breeding ground for greed and exploitation. It resulted in societies which lacked empathy and ignored the plight of the poor and needy. In those societies, the spirit of giving and sharing waned, and gradually the gap between the rich and poor grew greater. Accumulating wealth began to be considered as the highest achievement in a person's life. Becoming rich became the goal of every man and the cost of achieving this goal was not questioned.

But if the body and its needs become a barrier or hindrance to the progress of the soul, then there is a serious problem. These days, in the economic life of humanity, the body and its wants have taken over the needs and desires of the soul. The servant has become the master, and precious human lives are being wasted in the pursuit of the desires of the body. The Baha'i teachings explain:

The soul of man is the sun by which his body is illumined, and from which it draweth its sustenance, and should be so regarded. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 155.

Because we've prioritized the needs of the body over the needs of the soul, the economic situation of the world has spun out of control. Because of the great economic disparities this over-emphasis on the body has caused, we have to admit that only spirituality can deal with the worldwide spread of this disease of greed and self-centeredness. Because of the massive suffering of the poor, we have to find ways to bring a new sense of justice to the world.

To do all that, we need to take a few steps back and define the purpose and the nature of economics and then try to find remedies for its problems:

The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Baha'i World*, Volume IV, p. 448.

In the past, we've looked in the wrong direction for the solutions to the world's economic problems. But as the economic situation gets worse and more desperate for so many people around the globe, we can start to consider spiritual and moral solutions to our civilization's economic problems. The soul knows, and it can guide us to build a new economic system that can accommodate all aspects of human life—for all humans. The Baha'i teachings say:

Through the power of the rational soul, man can discover the realities of things, comprehend their properties, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All the sciences, branches of learning, arts, inventions, institutions, undertakings, and discoveries have resulted from the comprehension of the rational soul. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, newly revised edition, p. 219.

Where do we start? Maybe by accepting the fact that there is more to humanity than our physical needs, and that our spiritual needs have to be recognized and become the focal point of our attention. By recognizing our inner spiritual needs, and combining them with physical needs, we will have the impetus and the insight to create a balanced economic system that covers all aspects of our lives and allows us to attain the desires of our souls.

The history of economics has shown us that a system without spiritual guidance can lose its effectiveness and eventually become oppressive and cruel. The Baha'i teachings provide the guidance the world needs

to remedy the injustices done to the poor and underprivileged people of society. By implementing spiritual solutions to our economic problems, we can resolve those injustices.