

Coherence Between Material and Spiritual Dimensions of Existence

The Nature of Bahá'í Social and Economic Development

Issues for Social Action with Youth

Bahá'í Social – Social Action⁵ coherence

From a Compilation by the Research Department of Universal House of Justice - August 2020

Revelation of God's Attributes

... whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth is a direct evidence of the revelation within it of the attributes and names of God, inasmuch as within every atom are enshrined the signs that bear eloquent testimony to the revelation of that most great Light.

Religion the Chief Instrument

Religion is verily the chief instrument for the establishment of order in the world and of tranquillity amongst its peoples.... The greater the decline of religion, the more grievous the waywardness of the ungodly. This cannot but lead in the end to chaos and confusion.

Religion, science and reason

... religion must be in conformity with science and reason, so that it may influence the hearts of men. The foundation must be solid and must not consist of imitations.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, First Tablet to The Hague)

Material and Divine Civilisation

*... although material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained....
Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark.*

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, First Tablet to The Hague)

Material and Divine Civilisation

Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse. It has thus been made evident that the world of mankind is in need of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without the spirit the world of mankind is lifeless, and without this light the world of mankind is in utter darkness.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, First Tablet to The Hague)

Material and Spiritual

... until material achievements, physical accomplishments and human virtues are reinforced by spiritual perfections, luminous qualities and characteristics of mercy, no fruit or result shall issue therefrom, nor will the happiness of the world of humanity, which is the ultimate aim, be attained. For although, on the one hand, material achievements and the development of the physical world produce prosperity, which exquisitely manifests its intended aims, on the other hand dangers, severe calamities and violent afflictions are imminent.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, par. 225.5)

Harmonise religion and science

We hope that the beloved of God and the handmaids of the Merciful will, in accordance with the heavenly Teachings, serve the oneness of the world of humanity, regard religion as the basis of love and fellowship amongst the people, strive to harmonize religion and science, become a treasury of riches for the poor and a shelter and asylum for the fugitive, bring joy and radiance to the destitute, and aid the needy through the strengthening grace of the All-Merciful.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, from a Tablet—translated from the Persian)

Material and Spiritual Civilisation

Material civilization is like unto the lamp, while spiritual civilization is the light in that lamp. If the material and spiritual civilization become united, then we will have the light and the lamp together, and the outcome will be perfect. For material civilization is like unto a beautiful body, and spiritual civilization is like unto the spirit of life. If that wondrous spirit of life enters this beautiful body, the body will become a channel for the distribution and development of the perfections of humanity.

Two Wings

For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilization; the other is spiritual power and divine civilization. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilization advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilization.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), p. 16)

Material and Spiritual Civilisation

No matter how far the material world advances, it cannot establish the happiness of mankind. Only when material and spiritual civilization are linked and coordinated will happiness be assured. Then material civilization will not contribute its energies to the forces of evil in destroying the oneness of humanity, for in material civilization good and evil advance together and maintain the same pace.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), pp. 151-152)

Material and Spiritual Civilisation

For example, consider the material progress of man in the last decade. Schools and colleges, hospitals, philanthropic institutions, scientific academies and temples of philosophy have been founded, but hand in hand with these evidences of development, the invention and production of means and weapons for human destruction have correspondingly increased....

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), pp. 151-152)

Material and Spiritual Civilisation

All this is the outcome of material civilization; therefore, although material advancement furthers good purposes in life, at the same time it serves evil ends....

If the moral precepts and foundations of divine civilization become united with the material advancement of man, there is no doubt that the happiness of the human world will be attained and that from every direction the glad tidings of peace upon earth will be announced.

Material and Spiritual Civilisation

Then humankind will achieve extraordinary progress, the sphere of human intelligence will be immeasurably enlarged, wonderful inventions will appear, and the spirit of God will reveal itself; all men will consort in joy and fragrance, and eternal life will be conferred upon the children of the Kingdom.... Therefore, the material and the divine, or merciful, civilizations must progress together until the highest aspirations and desires of humanity shall become realized.

Material and Divine Science

Scientific knowledge is the highest attainment upon the human plane, for science is the discoverer of realities. It is of two kinds: material and spiritual. Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both. A bird has two wings; it cannot fly with one. Material and spiritual science are the two wings of human uplift and attainment. Both are necessary—one the natural, the other supernatural; one material, the other divine.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), p. 195-196)

Agreement between religion and science

God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to determine the verity of questions and propositions. If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science, they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition. Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), pp.251-252)

Divine virtues are unlimited

No matter how much the world of humanity advances in material civilization, it is nevertheless in need of the spiritual development mentioned in the Gospel. The virtues of the material world are limited, whereas divine virtues are unlimited. Inasmuch as material virtues are limited, man's need of the perfections of the divine world is unlimited.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), p. 287)

The material needs the spiritual

Throughout human history we find that although the very apex of human virtues has been reached at various times, yet they were limited, whereas divine attainments have ever been unbounded and infinite. The limited is ever in need of the unlimited. The material must be correlated with the spiritual. The material may be likened to the body, but divine virtues are the breathings of the Holy Spirit itself. The body without spirit is not capable of real accomplishment. Although it may be in the utmost condition of beauty and excellence, it is, nevertheless, in need of the spirit. The chimney of the lamp, no matter how polished and perfect it be, is in need of the light. Without the light, the lamp or candle is not illuminating. Without the spirit, the body is not productive.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, [The Promulgation of Universal Peace](#), p. 287)

Spiritual and material civilisation

This last world war together with the treaty of peace and its consequences have taught humanity that unless national, religious and political prejudices be abolished, unless universal brotherhood be established, unless spiritual civilization be given an equal footing with material civilization and thereby change the standard of individual, national and international morality, the world is doomed to failure and society to utter destruction.

(From a letter written circa 1924 on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

Draw closer to the spiritual

The present social and economic problems that are facing the British people are surely occupying their whole attention, but they should also operate as a reminder and draw them closer to spiritual matters. The people have to be made conscious of the fact that without a complete change in our outlook and a total reform of the guiding principles of our life, such as the Cause advocates, our social and economic problems cannot be solved nor our conditions ameliorated.

(From a letter dated 7 November 1931 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

People need purpose

It is not merely material well-being that people need. What they desperately need is to know how to live their lives—they need to know who they are, to what purpose they exist, and how they should act towards one another; and, once they know the answers to these questions they need to be helped to gradually apply these answers to everyday behaviour. It is to the solution of this basic problem of mankind that the greater part of all our energy and resources should be directed....

(Universal House of Justice, 19 November 1974 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Change spiritual conditions

... 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.

(Universal House of Justice, 19 November 1974 to a National Spiritual Assembly)

Both spiritual and material

With regard to the harmony of science and religion, the Writings of the Central Figures and the commentaries of the Guardian make abundantly clear that the task of humanity, including the Bahá'í community that serves as the “leaven” within it, is to create a global civilization which embodies both the spiritual and material dimensions of existence. The nature and scope of such a civilization are still beyond anything the present generation can conceive.

(Letter dated 19 May 1995 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Religion and Science

The prosecution of this vast enterprise will depend on a progressive interaction between the truths and principles of religion and the discoveries and insights of scientific inquiry. This entails living with ambiguities as a natural and inescapable feature of the process of exploring reality. It also requires us not to limit science to any particular school of thought or methodological approach postulated in the course of its development. The challenge facing Bahá'í thinkers is to provide responsible leadership in this endeavour, since it is they who have both the priceless insights of the Revelation and the advantages conferred by scientific investigation.

(Letter dated 19 May 1995 on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

Religion and Science

... religion and science are the two indispensable knowledge systems through which the potentialities of consciousness develop. Far from being in conflict with one another, these fundamental modes of the mind's exploration of reality are mutually dependent and have been most productive in those rare but happy periods of history when their complementary nature has been recognized and they have been able to work together. The insights and skills generated by scientific advance will have always to look to the guidance of spiritual and moral commitment to ensure their appropriate application; religious convictions, no matter how cherished they may be, must submit, willingly and gratefully, to impartial testing by scientific methods.

(Universal House of Justice, message dated April 2002 to the World's Religious Leaders)

Science and Religion

... science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances; ... religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism; ... true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul....

(Universal House of Justice, message dated 2 March 2013 to the Bahá'ís of Iran)

Social and spiritual progress

As the place from which spiritual forces are to radiate, the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár is the focal point for dependencies to be raised up for the well-being of humanity and is the expression of a common will and eagerness to serve. These dependencies—centres of education and scientific learning as well as cultural and humanitarian endeavour—embody the ideals of social and spiritual progress to be achieved through the application of knowledge, and demonstrate how, when religion and science are in harmony, they elevate the station of the human being and lead to the flourishing of civilization.

(Universal House of Justice, message dated 18 December 2014 to the Bahá'ís in Iran)

Social and spiritual progress

As your lives amply demonstrate, worship, though essential to the inner life of the human being and vital to spiritual development, must also lead to deeds that give outward expression to that inner transformation. This concept of worship—inseparable from service—is promulgated by the Mashriqu'l-Adhkár.

(Universal House of Justice, message dated 18 December 2014 to the Bahá'ís in Iran)

How much is enough?

New Dream helps Americans start a conversation about the social and environmental effects of their materialistic lifestyle and the question of "how much is enough?" The major cause of the continued degradation of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialized countries. Can Americans enjoy a high-quality life while consuming less? Can they embrace a new "American Dream" of a thriftier, more conserving lifestyle, with more time for friends, family, hobbies and community life?

How much is enough?

The average American every week uses the equivalent of 300 shopping bags filled with natural resources for food, shelter, energy and transportation. Americans end up paying about \$200 billion a year on cleanup of resource extraction, pollution and wastes. Yet a majority of people agreed with the statement, 'I believe my own buying habits have a negative effect on the environment.' People will consider changes in their consumption habits when they see clear links between their materialistic way of life and environmental degradation.



How much is enough?

The American dream of having more and more is killing people and the environment. People are hungry to talk about their disappointment with the work-and-shop consumer treadmill, and how to find a better balance in their lives. Many Americans believe they are on the wrong track, focusing too much on acquiring things while their families and environment suffer. While many families are stuck in poverty, others are finding that the race to have it all leaves them feeling empty.

How much is enough?

As more and more income is required to achieve a middle class standard of living, many Americans find themselves working longer hours, and going into debt, to reach those standards. At the same time, that standard of living turns out to be extremely destructive of the environment, both because of what and how much they consume. The effort to keep up with higher-spending neighbors is increasingly unhealthy and destructive.

How much is enough?

People of all backgrounds share certain fundamental concerns about the values they see driving society. They believe materialism, greed, and selfishness increasingly dominate American life, crowding out a more meaningful set of values centered on family, responsibility, and community. People express a strong desire for a greater sense of balance in their lives - not to repudiate material gain, but to bring it more into proportion with the non-material rewards of life.

How much is enough?

Downshifting, living more simply, and being more in tune with the environment and inner goals are becoming extremely significant trends in contemporary America. Huge majorities of Americans cite responsibility, family life, and friendship as key guiding principles for themselves. They would like to have more balance in their lives.

IEF case study *How much is enough?* presented at IEF workshop in 2004:
<https://iefworld.org/elcamdream.htm>