

Are Baha'is Capitalists or Socialists?

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The Baha'i principles, like the teachings of every major religion on Earth but maybe even more so, pay enormous attention to alleviating the plight of poor people – but does that mean Baha'is are socialists?

A constant and consistent theme throughout Baha'u'llah's and Abdu'l-Baha's writings, poverty and its alleviation represent a primary priority for all individual Baha'is and every Baha'i administrative institution. Without any doubt, Baha'u'llah repeatedly urged humanity to prioritize, protect, and care for the poor:

Be ye trustworthy on earth, and withhold not from the poor the things given unto you by God through His grace. – Baha'u'llah, *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*

O ye rich ones on earth! If ye encounter one who is poor, treat him not disdainfully. Reflect upon that whereof ye were created. Every one of you was created of a sorry germ. – Ibid.

O son of spirit! Vaunt not thyself over the poor, for I lead him on his way and behold thee in thy evil plight and confound thee for evermore. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*

O son of man! Bestow My wealth upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendor and treasures of imperishable glory. But by My life! To offer up thy soul is a more glorious thing couldst thou but see with Mine eye. – Ibid.

O children of dust! Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth. To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues. – Ibid.

When people first encounter the Baha'i teachings and start to study them, this emphasis on the eradication of poverty might lead them to think that Baha'is advocate a traditional socialistic approach – but that would be a mistake.

The Universal House of Justice, the democratically-elected administrative body of the world's Baha'is, expressed the Baha'i position on the competing economic ideologies of capitalism and socialism in a 1985 message called *The Promise of World Peace*:

All too many of these ideologies, alas, instead of embracing the concept of the oneness of mankind and promoting the increase of concord among different peoples, have tended to deify the state, to subordinate the rest of mankind to one nation, race or class, to attempt to suppress all discussion and interchange of ideas, or to callously abandon starving millions to the operations of a market system that all too clearly is aggravating the plight of the majority of mankind, while enabling small sections to live in a condition of affluence scarcely dreamed of by our forebears.

Each of these two currently dominant economic models, the Baha'i teachings point out, relies on an underlying doctrine of materialism, which defines people as primarily selfish, acquisitive beings who will always consider their own interests first. Capitalism, which prioritizes profit; and socialism, which prioritizes the re-distribution of wealth, have this one major concept in common. Both systems have evolved in the modern era around a core philosophy of inherent self-interest, which has enshrined materialistic ideals as the dominant forces in human life. The Baha'i Faith bases its economic teachings on a completely different precept: that we humans have the power to develop our altruistic and spiritual realities in the pursuit of justice, unity, and equity for all people, transcending selfishness and building a sustainable global community.



So we're not grasping, self-serving individuals at heart – instead, the Baha'i teachings promise us, we are noble beings, with the ability to express love and compassion to one another.

In that sense, then, Baha'is consider themselves neither socialists nor capitalists. Instead, the Baha'i teachings reconcile and combine the best aspects of both economic systems, while dispensing with the elements in each that lead to oppression and injustice.

In light of the world's great disparity of wealth and poverty, the Universal House of Justice has called on humanity and its governments to undertake a serious accounting of the moral impacts of these two economic systems on the world:

The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of materialism, whether of the east or the west, whether of capitalism or socialism, must give account of the moral stewardship they have presumed to exercise. Where is the “new world” promised by these ideologies? Where is the international peace to whose ideals they proclaim their devotion? Where are the breakthroughs into new realms of cultural achievement produced by the aggrandizement of this race, of that nation or of a particular class? Why is the vast majority of the world's peoples sinking ever deeper into hunger and wretchedness when wealth on a scale undreamed of by the Pharaohs, the Caesars, or even the imperialist powers of the nineteenth century is at the disposal of the present arbiters of human affairs? Most particularly, it is in the glorification of material pursuits, at once the progenitor and common feature of all such ideologies, that we find the roots which nourish the falsehood that human beings are incorrigibly selfish and aggressive. It is here that the ground must be cleared for the building of a new world fit for our descendants.

That materialistic ideals have, in the light of experience, failed to satisfy the needs of mankind calls for an honest acknowledgement that a fresh effort must now be made to find the solutions to the agonizing problems of the planet. – Ibid.

Baha'is believe, simply, that we all have souls, and that our souls each have a higher destiny than mere self-interest. Instead, everyone has the potential, the capacity, and the inner desire to love others enough that we will begin to consider them members of one human family:

Certainly, some being enormously rich and others lamentably poor, an organization is necessary to control and improve this state of affairs. It is important to limit riches, as it is also of importance to limit poverty. Either extreme is not good. To be seated in the mean is most desirable. If it be right for a capitalist to possess a large fortune, it is equally just that his workman should have a sufficient means of existence. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*

Committing ourselves to this kind of fairness and justice, and to the organization necessary to bring it about, means that each one of us can contribute to the spiritual solutions our current economic systems leave neglected and unaddressed. We can all help homeless people in a hundred different ways, from a smile to a meal to working with others to provide housing and services. When we focus on our inner spiritual realities, we can extend ourselves in serving others, certain that those acts of selfless service will elevate and enrich our souls:

Therefore, I desire that your hearts may be directed to the Kingdom of God, that your intentions may be pure and sincere, your purposes turned toward altruistic accomplishment unmindful of your own welfare; nay, rather, may all your intentions

center in the welfare of humanity, and may you seek to sacrifice yourselves in the pathway of devotion to mankind. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*