

We Can Overcome Consumerism

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We live in a world where an ever-increasing number of people consume more and more things—and that overconsumption harms humanity.

This consumption depletes the resources of the Earth; dangerously pollutes our water, air, and soil; and is a major cause of global warming. There is no doubt—continual economic growth is unrealistic on a finite planet.

The United Nations addresses this formidable problem with their Sustainable Development Goal 12: Responsible Consumption and Production, which says we must: “urgently reduce our ecological footprint by changing the way we produce and consume goods and resources.”

At the same time, too many people today cannot even meet their basic needs. They need to be supported in sustainable development and should have the right to their fair share of the Earth’s resources. This makes the reduction of consumption by the wealthier people of the world all the more important—which includes most people who live in developed countries, as well as the well-to-do and middle class in the developing world.

The challenge we face is huge, because present generations have grown up in a culture of consumerism. They have not experienced any other way of life. People take consumer goods for granted and feel entitled to possess them.

Despite their ability to enjoy material goods on a scale and quality unprecedented in human history, many people are not happy, and a mental health crisis is in progress with increasing numbers of people afflicted by depression and addictions—with some of them even becoming prone to suicide and acts of violence. Studies have shown that once basic needs are met, more material goods don’t enhance happiness.

Materialism and consumerism, then, do not fulfill the real needs of people, and they ultimately destroy the Earth’s life support-systems, endangering even the survival of human civilization.

All the world's religions warn us about greed, for example, the Tao te Ching teaches "There is no greater calamity than indulging in greed." The Bible says: "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." – Luke 12:15. Islam admonishes "O children of Adam, ... eat and drink, but be not extravagant. Indeed, He likes not those who commit extravagance." – Qur'an 7:31.

This does not mean we should go to the other extreme, to asceticism. We can enjoy the beautiful things this world offers us, even as we significantly reduce our consumption.

All of this means that we need to rethink the purpose of our lives, considering that humans are spiritual beings. If we don't nourish our souls, we will stay hungry, even at the most lavish banquet of material things. The Baha'i teachings say that:

... the world is but a show, bearing the semblance of reality. Set not your affections upon it ... the world is like the vapor in a desert, which the thirsty dreameth to be water and striveth after it with all his might, until when he cometh unto it, he findeth it to be mere illusion. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 328-329.

But merely asking people to drastically reduce their consumption would likely be useless. Their emptiness must first be filled with a spiritual connection, with meaning, and a sense of belonging. A deeper understanding of their purpose in life will provide the foundation for a substantial reduction in consumption. The empty promises of materialism will then no longer be needed. People will be much more open to facing the reality of our planet's environmental crisis—and to live a more simple, environmentally sustainable life.

The worship of the golden calf of materialism and of the myth of unlimited economic growth can then be replaced with connecting ourselves to our spiritual essence and to our Creator.

The Torah teaches "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." – Deuteronomy 6:5. And Jesus said "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself." – Mark 12:31. The love for God and for His creation makes us care about all the people who are exploited in the current economic system, and care for all other creatures of this Earth that are suffering or even becoming extinct because of habitat loss, pollution, and a changing climate.

Such love creates purpose in our life, as well as a sense of belonging.

Baha'is believe that all people are created as noble beings and deserve equal rights. At the same time, each individual shares some responsibility for the well-being of society.

The Baha'i teachings say that people find happiness in the promotion of "**... the best interests of the peoples ... of the earth.**" – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 250.

Baha'u'llah said "**Let your vision be world-embracing, rather than confined to your own self.**" – *Ibid.*, p. 94. Such an altruistic attitude that comes from deep within an individual is the

key to that individual's happiness—as well as a prerequisite for the large-scale changes needed as we move toward a sustainable civilization.

Imagine a society that cares about the welfare of each individual, and where individuals are eager to contribute to the common good. Serving together to make the world a better place makes people truly happy. It provides their lives with profound purpose, and with a sense of belonging to a meaningful social circle. There are many areas of social needs where we can make a difference instead of wasting our time, minds, and hearts in the pursuit of senseless shopping. The tricky question is how to get there. Over the past couple of decades, the global Baha'i community has experimented with a model of social transformation that seems to work. Communities empower themselves with study classes that provide spiritual nourishment, ethical values, as well as skills and experience for practical service to the community. This model has been used with adults, youth, and children in almost all the countries of the world. These educational efforts could be expanded and replicated. They have already shown that they work and hold great promise for the future, because they build the foundation for social transformation. People will no longer have the need for excessive consumption, because they are fulfilled with a meaningful life.

The Baha'i Teachings say:

... the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.
– Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 2-3.