

Religion and Social Progress: Beyond the Clash of Extremes



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It is fairly safe to suggest that, over the past century, hardly any issue has been as controversial as the role of religion in public life. It is also a historic fact that over the period, a mix of scientific, technological, and social developments has made socio-economic life far more complex and intellectually exciting, yet systemically unstable, with rising vulnerability to socio-political volatility. It is equally true that in the process our human conduct, both personal and collective, has drifted away from largely spiritual to manifestly functional utilitarian objectives. The rapid pace of globalisation has compounded the complexities and accelerated the move towards a more utilitarian worldview.

Experts may differ as to the root causes of these developments. Yet there is little disagreement that the upshot of them all is the prevailing unstable and troublesome socio-political system the world over. Widespread human suffering, abuse of political power, misuse of financial and economic resources, the spread of corruption, the rise of malfunctioning public administrations, and the scarcity of inspired leadership are the common phenomena in both developing and developed countries, in established and emerging democracies, in democratic and totalitarian states, in traditional tribal settings and in modern unified societies, in poor as well as in resourceful territories. In short, our sophisticated socio-economic system is facing a crisis of sustainability, legitimacy, and integrity.

The evolution of social progress, propelled by unprecedented advancements in technology, communication, transportation, and fostering of ideas, has systemically reduced the role of morality and ethics in various spheres of human civilization. Perspectives have shifted away from essential and long-term considerations to functional and short-term preoccupations. As such, this paper argues, a systemic issue has emerged which needs a systemic solution. Partial measures driven by opportunistic exigencies would at best deal with symptoms, leaving the root causes intact. This paper maintains that the systemic fault-line is largely due to the rise of materialistic secularism in the name of modernity and near neglect of religion and spirituality. The working premise of this paper is that science (as the engine of secularism) and religion (as the propagator of spirituality) are the two forces of social advancement. This is one of the central tenets of the Bahá'í Faith. The challenge facing us is thus not to sacrifice one on the altar of the other. To this end, Section I will review the rise of materialistic secularism and its aftermath. Section II will focus on social governance and the notion of development as it pervades public policy. This will be followed, in Section III, by a discussion of the spiritual

nature of humankind and the need for a paradigm change in unlocking human potential towards social progress. Section IV will offer some concluding remarks.

The Rise of Secularism and Its Aftermath

Although the British writer George Holyoake is widely credited with having coined the term ‘secularism’ in 1851¹, the underlying idea – of the need for mutual compatibility of faith and reason – is much older. According to Bhatt, “We might say...that [12th century Islamic scholar] Ibn Rushd originated the modern form of secularism.”² Neither Holyoake nor Ibn Rushd set out to actively undermine religious belief. Indeed, Holyoake stated in his *Principles of Secularism* that his was a doctrine “to which the idea of God is not essential, nor the denial of the idea necessary.”³ However, the term secularism itself has evolved over time. Karl Marx’s famous phrase, “religion is the opiate of the masses”, helped shift the connotation of secularism into a materialistic domain. The subsequent emergence of socialist and communist states in the 20th century expressed a vast and prominent social experiment inspired by the materialistic notions of secularism.

Interestingly, Western capitalist societies followed a similar materialistic secular path, albeit with more reliance on market mechanisms, and with less systematic oppression of religion and its institutions.

The moral and intellectual outrage against secular state practices, both in the East and in the West, has led to a wide range of protestations, even terrorism. It may be argued that the aftermath of materialistic secularism in its diverse manifestations is no less or more undesirable than the reign of static and institutionalised oppressive religious regimes.

The philosophical and intellectual rebellion against religion and religious abuse was understandable. The undeniable historical truth is that religions have been manipulated and used for the realisation of narrow ends. Not only in bygone ages, but also at present, in many parts of the world, religions are used as an instrument of oppression, social abuse of women in particular, human rights violations in general, and political domination. Many wars have been fought in the name of religion and against the resurgence of religious sentiments. Much socio-economic destruction and widespread disillusionment with religion and institutionalised religious establishments have emerged accordingly and justifiably.

Secularism over time has evolved and led to social experiments that continue to have widespread undesirable social, economic and environmental consequences. These have resulted in reactionary backlash on the part of religious groupings and institutions as well as non-religious social activists all over the world. The moral and intellectual outrage against secular state practices, both in the East and in the West, has led to a wide range of protestations, even terrorism. It may be argued that the aftermath of materialistic secularism in its diverse manifestations is no less or more undesirable than the reign of static and institutionalised oppressive religious regimes.

For social progress, prosperity and development the role of religion and secularism needs a far more nuanced and scientific approach. As noted by the Bahá’í International Community, on the Occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the United Nations:

The debate about religion in the public sphere, however, has been driven by the voices and actions of extreme proponents on both sides -- those who impose

their religious ideology by force, whose most visible expression is terrorism -- and those who deny any place for expressions of faith or belief in the public sphere. Yet neither extreme is representative of the majority of humankind and neither promotes a sustainable peace.⁴

Social Governance and Developmental Goals

The rise of secularism and its rapid transmutation into materialism has had deep systemic consequences. As mentioned earlier, all modalities of social governance, ie capitalism, socialism and communism, defined progress and the ultimate goals of socio-economic development in terms of material indicators alone. These systems of governance differed only in terms of the means of delivery; that is, some relied on the machinery of the state to achieve developmental goals whilst others propagated a mixed economy made of both state and market structures. In effect,

development defined in terms of certain patterns of “modernization,” however, seems to refer exactly to those processes, which promote the domination of people’s material ambitions over their spiritual goals. While the search of a scientific and technologically modern society is a central goal of human development, it must base its educational, economic, political, and cultural structures on the concept of the spiritual nature of the human being and not only on his or her material needs.⁵

However, the sidelining of religion in the definition of developmental objectives reduced the developmental challenge to a purely materialistic enterprise. This, in turn, has led to a gradual but systemic dilution of ethical conduct over the period.

In almost all countries, including South Africa, over the past while, a gradual but tangible rift has emerged between the country’s socio-economic and political ‘formal’ (professed) as opposed to ‘informal’ (practised) ethics. For example, in the business sector, executives and corporations formally subscribe to ‘codes of good corporate governance’. Their annual glossy reports are decorated with ‘impressive evidence’ of their socially responsible citizenship. Yet, operationally, they do not hesitate to collude or abuse their market powers. Evidence of price fixing amongst pharmaceutical companies, bread producers and steel manufacturers has led, in recent years, to high profile cases in South Africa. Sasol, South Africa’s most celebrated petrochemical corporation, has been heavily fined, both locally and by the EU, for its extensive anti-competitive practices. The country’s banking sector is also accused of malpractice and a report in this regard is yet to be made public by the Competition Commission. The banking sector is alleged to be exerting every pressure to halt its publication. Cellphone companies are likewise accused of collusion.

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The gap between formal and informal ethics within the government sector is even more pervasive. Frequently, government ministers and departmental executives espouse ‘global best practices’, and yet operationally in their organisational and managerial conduct there is little evidence of the values, standards, or practices that conform to their formal statements. Duality of values is equally prevalent in labour unions, the media sector and other social structures. Most poignantly, religious organisations have not been spared the scourge of the duality of values either.

So, the world over, there is an evident and disturbing prevalence of systemic inconsistency of ethical conduct. This, I submit, is the bitter fruit of the promotion of a materialistic enterprise over the past century. This is best captured in the modern theory of the firm. The firm, within the finance paradigm, is seen as a complex network of contractual relations, mostly implicit, between various interest groups. “Within this finance paradigm,” Dobson observes,

a rational agent is simply one who pursues personal material advantage ad infinitum. In essence, to be rational in finance is to be individualistic, materialistic, and competitive. Business is a game played by individuals, as with all games the object is to win, and winning is measured in terms solely of material wealth. Within the discipline this rationality concept is never questioned, and has indeed become the theory-of-the-firm’s sine qua non.⁶

The same paradigm is by and large replicated in competitive democratic governance regimes. As Michael Karlberg, in his assessment of Western Liberal Democracy, notes:

The breakdown in civility, the rise of mean-spiritedness, the problem of gridlock, and the spread of political corruption – assuming these things have indeed deteriorated over time – are not abuses or corruption of the partisan system. Such developments are the culmination – the ‘perfection’ – of a system that political scientist Jane Mansbridge refers to as “adversary democracy”.⁷

Furthermore, Karlberg argues that political competition undermines the ability of the state to correct market distortions and failures. He maintains:

The reasons for this are not difficult to understand. Political competition is an expensive activity – and growing more expensive with every generation. Successful campaigns are waged by those who have the financial support, both direct and indirect, of the most affluent market actors (i.e. those who have profited the most from market excesses and deficiencies)...This problem is a primary cause of the growing disparities of wealth and poverty that are now witnessed throughout the world, including within the Western world.⁸

Complex social, economic and environmental problems inherently require long-term planning and continued commitment. Yet, individualistic competitive political leaders seek short-term remedies, often at the expense of exacerbating the problems.

The prevalence of materialistic secularism has yet another critical adverse socio-economic consequence. Complex social, economic and environmental problems inherently require long-term planning and continued commitment. Yet, individualistic competitive political leaders seek short-term remedies, often at the expense of exacerbating the problems. Karlberg underscores the point that

in order to gain and maintain power, political entrepreneurs must cater to the immediate interests of their constituents so that visible results can be realized within relatively frequent election cycles. Even when long-term political commitments are made out of principle by one candidate or party, continuity is often compromised by succeeding candidates or parties who dismantle or fail to enforce the programmes of their predecessors in order to distance themselves from policies they were previously compelled to oppose on campaign trail or as the voice of opposition. The focus of campaigns and political parties on constituencies-in-the-present therefore undermines commitment to the interests of future generations.⁹

In brief, in nearly all spheres of human activity the dominance of materialistic secularism has caused systemic distortions with deep social, political and economic impact. The most fundamental of these distortions is about the concept of human nature. Underlying all these practices is the assumption that human nature is essentially selfish, competitive and exclusionary. This basic assumption needs to be challenged. The Universal House of Justice, the governing body of the Bahá'í International Community, observes that

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.¹⁰

Changing the Paradigm: Engaging with the Spiritual Essence of Human Nature

In line with all major divine religions, the Bahá'í Faith emphasises the spiritual essence of human nature. It acknowledges humanity's inherent potential for both egoism and altruism, and in this context it underscores the significance of education, social environment, and the promotion of a balanced material and spiritual advancement. Education, the Bahá'í Faith further underscores, has both a divine and a secular source.

The former is infused through religion, via divine Teachers or Messengers, whereas the latter originates from scientific research and intellectual inquiry.

The progress of an ever-advancing civilization generates continuous change and social complexity, and as such spiritual education is needed to ensure matching human spiritual maturity to engender social harmony and peace.

The spiritual essence of human nature necessitates continuous nurturing via Progressive Revelation¹¹ – a process which is conducive to the spiritual evolution of mankind. Spiritual growth itself is a key requirement for social cohesion, the promotion of social harmony and the creation of reciprocity within a socially complex environment. The progress of an ever-advancing civilization generates continuous change and social complexity, and as such spiritual education is needed to ensure matching human spiritual maturity to engender social harmony and peace.

Bahá'u'lláh (the Prophet-Founder of the Faith) taught, that Religion is the chief foundation of love and unity and the cause of oneness. If a religion become the cause of hatred and disharmony, it would be better that it should not exist. To be without such a religion is better than to be with it.¹²

Critically, science and religion are seen as

inter-twined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough. ...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.¹³

Not only the harmony between science and religion, but also a number of other principles are vital for creating a just and sustainable social order. Amongst them, the equality of rights of men and women stands uniquely significant. As the

Bahá'í scriptures highlight, *“Until the reality of equality between men and women is established and attained, the highest social development of mankind is not possible.”*

Critical for humanity's spiritual progress and social advancement is the rendering of service to the community. The Bahá'í Holy Writings state that “all effort and exertion put forth by man from the fullness of his heart is worship, if it is prompted by the highest motives and the will to do service to humanity. This is worship: to serve mankind and to minister to the needs of the people. Service is prayer.”¹⁴

Contrary to the aforementioned ideologies, and in vivid contrast to the assumptions of materialistic secularism, this spiritual enterprise promotes an alternative approach of people learning by advancing together, as opposed to the teacher–student format. It combines learning with doing, and especially with a strong service orientation.

In fact, the combination of learning and service, as part of an integrated framework, constitutes an important process of dynamic and collective empowerment. The world over, Bahá'í communities in thousands of locations are engaged in the promotion of concurrent learning and service rendering to their immediate communities and social environments. This is central to the global spiritual enterprise promoted and sustained by the worldwide Bahá'í community. Further emphasis is placed on children, pre-youth and youth. The working premise of this process is that each human being is endowed with a latent capability, with a spiritual awareness and a consciousness

that, if enhanced, can lead to both *self* and *group* empowerment. Contrary to the aforementioned ideologies, and in vivid contrast to the assumptions of materialistic secularism, this spiritual enterprise promotes an alternative approach of people learning by advancing together, as opposed to the teacher–student format. It combines learning with doing, and especially with a strong service orientation.

The experience of the South African Bahá'í community in this regard is encouraging and indeed inspiring. More often than not, the youth and pre-youth groups – the very groups who are expected to be rebellious and selfish – demonstrate considerable propensity to collaborate, cooperate and be constructive. Their willingness to render selfless service to the community and their energy to sustain creative initiatives for social good is immense.

The failure of materialistic secularism, and its resultant systemic malaise the world over, has necessitated the development and promotion of alternative approaches. Critical for such alternatives is the recognition of the spiritual essence of human nature. One such approach is the current worldwide spiritual enterprise promoted by the Bahá'í International Community.

Concluding Remarks

Despite the prevalence of materialistic secularism over the past century, it has proven futile, indeed self-defeating, to sideline religion. This is analogous to religious institutions' attempts at sidelining science in the Early Modern period. Both experiments have failed. Science and religion have critical, but different, roles to play in advancing civilization.

Given the spiritual nature of human beings, religion has a pivotal role in socio-economic, political and public spheres. Even the forefathers of modern economics have argued convincingly that no socio-economic system is sustainable, let alone prosperous, without a set of moral values that are generally internalised across the society. With the rise of globalisation and growing diversity, the establishment and

promotion of an explicit set of values is of overwhelming importance for the success of modern societies. It may be argued that given the overwhelming evidence of worldwide corruption, unethical conduct and the resultant social destruction, the need for religion, as the propagator of ethical conduct, has never been so dire.

However, for religion to play its pivotal role, it is imperative that mindsets change and paradigms shift. As Gregory Dahl, the author of *One World One People* notes:

It is a fact that most people in today's world are accustomed to the idea of change in all aspects of life except religion, which is viewed as static and in need of protection. The Bahá'í Faith, in contrast, is a religion which challenges us to change and grow, and which is itself changing and growing under the leadership of the Universal House of Justice so that it can meet the changing needs of the Bahá'í community and the world. In this faith the community, the individuals within it and the institutions collaborate and change together in a dynamic and organic process. This gives everyone a constructive role to play.¹⁵

NOTES

- 1 McGee, John E. (1948), *A History of the British Secular Movement*, Girard: Haldeman-Julius Publications
- 2 Bhatt, Chetan (2008), "The times of movements: a response to Judith Butler", *The British Journal of Sociology* 59(1), p. 26
- 3 Holyoake, George J., *The Principles of Secularism*, London: Austin & Co.
- 4 "The Search for Values in an Age of Transition", A Statement of the Bahá'í International Community on the Occasion of the 60th Anniversary of the United Nations
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Dobson, J. (1997), *Finance Ethics: The Rationality of Virtue*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- 7 Michael Karlberg, "Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?", *The Bahá'í World 2005-2006*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, p. 136
- 8 Ibid., pp. 138-39
- 9 Ibid., pp. 142-43
- 10 Universal House of Justice (1985), *The Promise of World Peace*, Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, p. 7
- 11 The notion of Progressive Revelation is an insightful and revealing tenet of the Bahá'í Faith. It suggests that the religion of God is one, but it has been revealed in a progressive manner over time dependent on the ability of the recipient in the age concerned. As such, it considers all the divine Messengers of God as successive authors of the various chapters of the same divine Book.
- 12 Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 28
- 13 Abdu'l-Baha, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 240
- 14 Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 176
- 15 Dahl, Gregory C. (1998), "One World One People: How Globalization is Shaping Our Future", Bahai Publishing, Wilmette, Illinois, USA