

Economic Justice

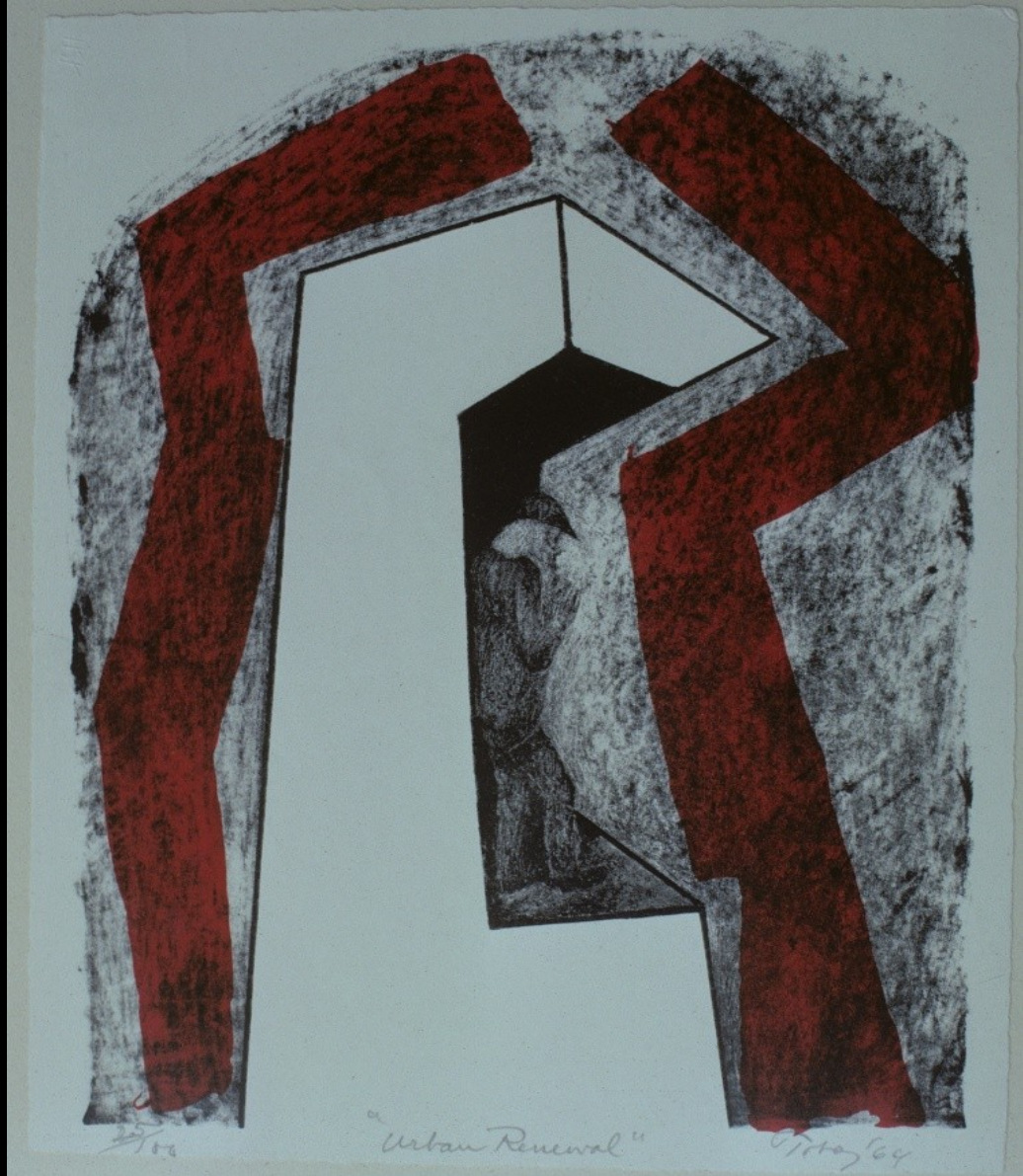
Detachment from consumerism
Principles for an alternative economy

Preparing for Public Discourse 3

by Arthur Lyon Dahl July 2022

ETHICAL CHALLENGES OF GLOBALIZATION

Has the economy
forgotten people?



Moderation in Material Civilization

The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men.... The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities...

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)

Materialism

- The early twentieth century materialistic interpretation of reality became the dominant world faith in the direction of society
- Humanity thought it had solved through rational experimentation and discourse all of the issues related to human governance and development
- Dogmatic materialism captured all significant centres of power and information at the global level, ensuring that no competing voices could challenge projects of world wide economic exploitation

(based on Universal House of Justice, *One Common Faith*, p. 3-4)

The moral bankruptcy of materialism

The time has come when those who preach the dogmas of **materialism**, whether of the east or of 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?... 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?

(Universal House of Justice (1985), *The Promise of World Peace*, I, p. 7)

The consumer culture

- Materialism's gospel of human betterment produced today's consumer culture pursuing ephemeral goals
- For the small minority of people who can afford them, the benefits it offers are immediate, and the rationale unapologetic
- The breakdown of traditional morality has led to the triumph of animal impulse, as instinctive and blind as appetite
- Selfishness becomes a prized commercial resource; falsehood reinvents itself as public information; greed, lust, indolence, pride - even violence - acquire not merely broad acceptance but social and economic value

Injustice

The economic life of humanity has recently embroiled so many people. Injustice is tolerated with indifference and disproportionate gain is regarded as the emblem of success.



Some spiritual principles

Work is Worship

O people of Baha! It is incumbent upon each one of you to engage in some **occupation** - such as a craft, a trade or the like. We have exalted your engagement in such work to the rank of **worship** of the one true God.... Waste not your hours in idleness and sloth, but occupy yourselves with what will profit you and others.... The most despised of men in the sight of God are they who sit and beg. Hold ye fast unto the cord of means and place your trust in God, the Provider of all means.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, para. 33, p. 30)

Contentment

[The true seeker] should be **content with little**, and be freed from all inordinate desire.... He should succour the dispossessed, and never withhold his favour from the destitute.

(Bahá'u'lláh, *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, p. 193-194)

Honesty

...eschew... dishonesty in one's transactions or the economic exploitation of others. There should be no contradiction between one's economic conduct and one's beliefs. By applying in one's life principles of fairness and equity, each person can uphold a standard far above the low threshold by which the world measures itself.

Social and Economic Justice

Social justice will be attained only when every member of society enjoys a relative degree of material prosperity and gives due regard to the acquisition of spiritual qualities. The solution, then, to prevailing economic difficulties is to be sought as much in the application of spiritual principles as in the implementation of scientific methods and approaches.

Ends and Means

Vigilance must be exercised in distinguishing "means" from "ends".

The acquisition of wealth is acceptable and praiseworthy to the extent that it serves as a means for achieving higher ends:

- providing people with basic necessities
- fostering social progress
- promoting the welfare of society
- contributing to the establishment of a world civilization.

To make the accumulation of wealth the central purpose of one's life is unworthy.

Goals and improper means

...the end does not serve to justify the means. However constructive and noble the goal..., it must not be attained through improper means. Regrettably, a number of today's leaders--political, social, and religious--as well as some of the directors of financial markets, executives of multinational corporations, chiefs of commerce and industry, and ordinary people who succumb to social pressure and ignore the call of their conscience, act against this principle; they justify any means in order to achieve their goals.

Wealth and its uses

Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired... in commerce, agriculture, crafts and industry, if the measures adopted... in generating wealth serve to enrich the generality of the people, and if the wealth thus obtained is expended for philanthropic purposes and the promotion of knowledge, for the establishment of schools and industry and the advancement of education, and in general for the welfare of society.

Justice in the enterprise

...the acquisition of wealth should be governed by the requirements of justice.... An employer and employee, for example, are bound by the laws and conventions that regulate their work, and each is expected to carry out his or her responsibilities with honesty and integrity.

Justice and wealth creation

...if the deeper implications of justice are to be realized, other preconditions to the legitimate acquisition of wealth must be taken into account, and prevailing norms reassessed in their light:

- the relationship between minimum wage and the cost of living, especially in light of the contribution workers make to a company's success and their entitlement to a fair share of the profits
- the wide margin, often unjustifiable, between the production costs of certain goods and the price at which they are sold
- the question of the generation of wealth through measures that enrich the generality of the people.

Unacceptable wealth creation

...certain approaches to obtaining wealth--so many of which involve the exploitation of others, the monopolization and manipulation of markets, and the production of goods that promote violence and immorality--are unworthy and unacceptable.

Sustainability - fundamental responsibility

Sustainable environmental management must come to be seen not as a discretionary commitment mankind can weigh against other competing interests, but rather as a fundamental responsibility that must be shouldered, a pre-requisite for spiritual development as well as the individual's physical survival.

Function of economic systems

Central to the task of reconceptualizing the organization of human affairs is arriving at a proper understanding of the role of **economics**. The failure to place economics into the broader context of humanity's social and spiritual existence has led to a corrosive materialism in the world's more economically advantaged regions, and persistent conditions of deprivation among the masses of the world's peoples. Economics should serve people's needs; societies should not be expected to reformulate themselves to fit economic models. **The ultimate function of economic systems should be to equip the peoples and institutions of the world with the means to achieve the real purpose of development: that is, the cultivation of the limitless potentialities latent in human consciousness.**

(Bahá'í International Community, [Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development](#). A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, 18-19 February 1998)

Principles for new economic models

Society must develop **new economic models** shaped by insights that arise from a sympathetic understanding of shared experience, from viewing human beings in relation one to another, and from a recognition of the central role that family and community play in social and spiritual well-being.

Resources must be directed... to furthering a dynamic, just and thriving social order. Such economic systems will be **strongly altruistic and cooperative in nature; they will provide meaningful employment and will help to eradicate poverty in the world.**

(Bahá'í International Community, Valuing Spirituality in Development: Initial Considerations Regarding the Creation of Spiritually Based Indicators for Development. A concept paper written for the World Faiths and Development Dialogue, Lambeth Palace, London, 18-19 February 1998)

Rethinking Economics 1

In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 2

The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society. No one... can remain unmoved by these consequences. "The world is in great turmoil," Baha'u'llah observes..., "and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions."

Rethinking Economics 3

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 4

A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 5

But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples....

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 6

...there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources. The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 7

The vision of Baha'u'llah challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Baha'i thought.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of the World*, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 8

But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Baha'u'llah's memorable words, "No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it."

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 9

Consideration of... the reorganization of human society... inevitably gives rise to questions of economics.... The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 10

Every choice [an individual] makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims....

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 11

Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside. Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard.

Rethinking Economics 12

A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man.... [T]he nobility inherent to every human being... is a fundamental tenet... upon which hope for the future of humankind is built.

Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources.

(Universal House of Justice, *To the Baha'is of the World*, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 13

"Man's merit lieth in service and virtue", Baha'u'llah avers, "and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches." And further: "Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest." By consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life and contributes to the upliftment of society itself....

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 14

“And the honour 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... he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, ... there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.”

(‘Abdu’l-Baha)

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha’is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 15

Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity. *"Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft, so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others."*

('Abdu'l-Baha)

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 16

The poor are urged by Baha'u'llah to "*exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood*", while they who are possessed of riches "*must have the utmost regard for the poor*". "*Wealth*", 'Abdu'l-Baha has affirmed, "*is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes.*"

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 17

At the same time, the *Hidden Words* [of Baha'u'llah] is replete with warnings of its perilous allure, that wealth is a "*mighty barrier*" between the believer and the proper Object of his adoration. No wonder, then, that Baha'u'llah extols the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom; the splendour of such a soul "*shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!*"

Rethinking Economics 18

Abdu'l-Baha declares that *"if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement"*. For wealth is most commendable *"provided the entire population is wealthy."* At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 19

The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 20

The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and [everyone] recognizes that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world. Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 21

With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one's generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one's eyes to injustice and privation. Over time, the[se] qualities and attitudes... help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self... rais[ing] consciousness of the need to manage one's material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

Rethinking Economics 22

The extremes of wealth and poverty in the world are becoming ever more untenable. As inequity persists, so the established order is seen to be unsure of itself, and its values are being questioned. Whatever the tribulations that a conflicted world must confront in the future, [every community must take up] its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings, ... [achieving] the higher purpose of economic activity.

(Universal House of Justice, To the Baha'is of the World, 1 March 2017)

A just salary for ministers

Overstep not the bounds of **moderation**, and deal justly with them that serve thee. Bestow upon them according to their **needs**, and not to the extent that will enable them to lay up riches for themselves, to deck their persons, to embellish their homes, to acquire the things that are of no benefit to them, and to be numbered with the extravagant. Deal with them with undeviating justice, so that none among them may either suffer want, or be pampered with luxuries. This is but manifest justice.

(Bahá'u'lláh [to the Sultan of Turkey], *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXIV, pp. 235-236)

Voluntary Sharing

... the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh advocate voluntary sharing, and this is a greater thing than the equalization of wealth. For equalization must be imposed from without, while sharing is a matter of free choice.

Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him. And sharing is a personally chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor, they should expend their substance for the poor, but of their own free will, and not because the poor have gained this end by force. For the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order. On the other hand voluntary sharing, the freely-chosen expending of one's substance, leadeth to society's comfort and peace. It lighteth up the world; it bestoweth honour upon humankind.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 79, p. 115)

Sharing Wealth

And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is **voluntary sharing** of one's property with others among mankind. This voluntary sharing is greater than equality, and consists in this, that man should not prefer himself to others, but rather should sacrifice his life and property for others. But this should not be introduced by coercion so that it becomes a law and man is compelled to follow it. Nay, rather, man should voluntarily and of his own choice sacrifice his property and life for others, and spend willingly for the poor....

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 227, p. 302)

Guaranteed minimum income

The fundamental basis of the community is **agriculture**, tillage of the soil. All must be producers. Each person in the community whose income is equal to his individual producing capacity shall be exempt from taxation. But if his income is greater than his needs he must pay a tax until an adjustment is effected.... if his necessities exceed his production he shall receive an amount sufficient to equalize or adjust. Therefore **taxation will be proportionate to capacity and production** and there will be no poor in the community.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1912), Foundations of World Unity, p. 37)

Capital and Labour

The question of socialization is very important. It will not be solved by strikes for wages. All the governments of the world must be united and organize an assembly the members of which should be elected from the parliaments and the nobles of the nations. These must plan with utmost wisdom and power so that neither the **capitalists** suffer from enormous losses nor the **laborers** become needy. In the utmost moderation they should make the law; then announce to the public that the rights of the working people are to be strongly preserved. Also the rights of the capitalists are to be protected. When such a general plan is adopted by the will of both sides, should a strike occur, all the governments of the world collectively should resist it. Otherwise the labor problem will lead to much destruction, especially in Europe. Terrible things will take place.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 1912, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 43-44)

Capital and Labour

...the owners of properties, mines and factories should **share their incomes** with their employees and give a fairly certain percentage of their products to their workingmen in order that the employees may receive, beside their wages, some of the general income of the factory so that the employee may strive with his soul in the work.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, 1912, Foundations of World Unity, p. 43-44)

Questions for discussion

What economic problems worry people the most?

Are people aware of the dangers of consumerism?

Are there some ethical businesses trying to do the right thing?

Are there efforts to build a sustainable local economy?

How can you introduce spiritual principles into discourse on the economy?

A serene sunset scene over a calm body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a golden glow across the sky and reflecting on the water's surface. The sky is filled with soft, dark clouds. In the foreground, the dark silhouettes of palm trees frame the scene on both sides.

Thank you

We can bring spirituality into our
discourse on economic problems