



and pollution assimilation capacity. Alternatives are described as increased barbarization or a fortress world, or some transition to a transformed world of environmental and social sustainability.

Excessive consumption could be described as a moral illness. The need for conspicuous consumption to demonstrate wealth, power and superiority becomes an emotional trap, and can even lead diagnosed conditions such as compulsive shopping. In the USA, the automobile becomes an expression of one's personality and status, a cocoon to shield its occupants from unwanted encounters with other people, an element of individual security. The envelope of possessions and consumptive activities becomes a mask to hide an inner vacuum and vulnerability.

Consumption has also become a collective economic addiction. Growth is an absolute economic requirement, and any suggestion that growth might have a limit is unthinkable in economic circles. It is necessary to keep the economy turning to maintain employment and generate more wealth. When there was an economic down-turn in France a few years ago, the government called on its citizens to withdraw their savings and spend for the good of the economy. A recent expression epitomizes the American way of life: "when the going gets tough, the tough go shopping".

An important dimension of the problem of consumption are the extremes of wealth and poverty, the fact that some consume too much while others do not have enough. It is estimated that the richest 20% of the world population

consumes 80% of the world's resources. Global solidarity in this area is conspicuously lacking, and in many countries the extremes have widened over the last two decades. There is global competition for limited resources, with the wealthy having the purchasing power to out-bid the poor even for essentials. The moral challenge will grow more extreme. One day if food shortages grow, the steak on your plate could mean several people starving to death.

Reducing excessive consumption does not necessarily have to mean a reduction in the standard of living. Recent studies show that the Western lifestyle could be maintained with much greater efficiency in resource use. It should be technically possible to reduce energy and resource use by a factor of 4 in the short term, and of 10 in the longer term, to release resources for use in assisting development elsewhere. These goals have in fact been adopted by the most developed countries.

### Sustainable consumption

Sustainable consumption refers to the need to stay within the limits of the global sustainability of resources. It includes the concept of equitable sharing within and between generations. Consumption requires wealth, so the distribution of wealth is an important component of sustainable consumption, along with the total wealth of materials consumed. Consumption changes meaning and value along the spectrum from absolute poverty to great wealth.

For the poor, consumption often means survival, and the meeting of basic needs for food, clean water, shelter, health, education, etc.

Along this spectrum, where is the borderline between "not enough" and "too much"? Abdu'l-Bahá wrote that "wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy" (The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 24-25). In this sense, the amount of acceptable consumption is relative, or should be defined by scientific or economic measures of the amount of wealth available. It should also be possible to define "good" and "bad" kinds of consumption, with desirable consumption including knowledge, education, art and industry and all those things that contribute to the welfare of society. Consumption is both an individual issue of what and how much a person consumes, and a collective issue of the sum total of consumption not exceeding sustainable limits.

### True prosperity

In this context, it is worth asking if consumption brings prosperity.

What is prosperity? Presumably an adequate amount of wealth. But this too is relative. There is an important cultural dimension to prosperity and the kinds of consumption used to signal prosperity. For the French, food would be a preferred medium of expression; for the Americans an automobile; and for the Samoans a village church. Prosperity can be expressed at an individual level through personal consumption, and at a collective or community level through the provision of joint services or facilities. Either option can increase prosperity.

A major issue is the excessive level of individual consumption in developed countries. It is worth reexamining the ethical basis for the "consumer society". Is prosperity material or spiritual, or some combination of both? What brings real happiness? Does it come from possessions, especially after basic needs have been met? Are possessions only one way to try to meet a more basic need for social acceptance, belonging and fitting in? Could happiness come from being of service, or being "rich in God"? The high consumption life-style may represent the pursuit of material happiness, but it can be very ephemeral. And how much is enough? Do we become the prisoner of our possessions? Are we trapped in the system? Should we be busy ourselves with the things of this world? What is "necessary"? These questions show how relative the concept of prosperity is, and the challenge that each individual faces in trying to define one's own concept of true prosperity.

### Spiritual

principles concerning consumption

Ultimately questions of consumption come down to each person's definition of his or her purpose in life. If it is material, then material consumption becomes an important element. If it is spiritual, then the whole perspective changes. What are some of the spiritual principles involved in addressing sustainable consumption? The following quotations from the Bahá'í writings shed some light on the issue of sustainable consumption and true prosperity:

## Moderation

"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)

## Harmony of material and spiritual

"And among the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that 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. 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." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, 227, pp. 303-304)

## Detachment

"Cleanse thyself from the defilement of riches and in perfect peace advance into the realm of poverty; that from the well-spring of detachment thou mayest quaff the wine of immortal life." (Bahá'u'lláh, The

Hidden Words (Persian) 55)

"Until man is born again from the world of nature, that is to say, becomes detached from the world of nature, he is essentially an animal, and it is the teachings of God which convert this animal into a human soul." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, 227, pp. 303-304)

## Poverty and wealth

"Know ye in truth that wealth is a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire, the lover and his beloved. The rich, but for a few, shall in no wise attain the court of His presence nor enter the city of content and resignation...." (Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words (Persian) 53)

"Be not troubled in poverty or confident in riches, for poverty is followed by riches, and riches are followed by poverty. Yet to be poor in all save God is a wondrous gift, belittle not the value thereof, for in the end it will make thee rich in God..." (Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words (Persian) 51)

[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)

"Wealth 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. Above all, 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 such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit or benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge,

the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor - in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society - its possessor will stand out before God and man as the most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise." (Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 24-25)

"The best of men are they that earn a livelihood by their calling and spend upon themselves and upon their kindred for the love of God, the Lord of all worlds." (Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words (Persian) 82)

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." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections

from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá, 79, p. 115)

Just redistribution of wealth in the community

"...the laws of the community will be so framed and enacted that it will not be possible for a few to be millionaires and many destitute. One of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is the adjustment of means of livelihood in human society. Under this adjustment there can be no extremes in human conditions as regards wealth and sustenance." (Abdu'l-Bahá, Foundations

of World Unity, p. 36)

"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, Foundations of World Unity, p. 37)

There are also resource issues that need to be addressed from a spiritual perspective. Maintaining the ecological balance of the planet is one of our responsibilities in our role as trustees of the world's resources.

Justice requires that the economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials fully utilized, its available sources of energy exploited, its markets coordinated and the distribution of its products equitably regulated on a world basis. These will be functions of a future world federation. World intercommunications will be developed as the basis for a world civilization uniting all peoples. These principles sketch out mechanisms to address the equity issues of sustainable consumption.

### Implications

of true prosperity and sustainable consumption

What does this view of prosperity and consumption mean for the future of Western Civilization? It is clear that it could have serious implications for an economic system built on endless growth in consumption, regardless of the kind of consumption.

Imagine, for example, how much of the present economy would be lost if damaging, destructive or useless kinds of consumption were eliminated.

This would include most military establishments and arms manufacture, industries supporting conspicuous consumption and luxury goods, the use of planned obsolescence as a tool to maintain sales, most advertising and excessive "brand" competition and marketing gimmicks, commercial sports and some forms of entertainment, and such harmful products as pornography, drugs, gambling, alcoholic beverages, tobacco and possibly even meat. Such fields as agriculture, transport and urbanization would need to be seriously modified. On the other hand, there would probably be an increase in communications, health, education, arts and culture, and even recreation.

Obviously the transition to a new society with different values will not be easy. It will require individual effort, rethinking the form and function of local communities, restructuring national economies, and effective mechanisms for global economic redistribution and resource management.

All this is part of the challenge of building a future global society in which sustainable consumption leads to true prosperity.

\*The views expressed are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect those of the United Nations Environment Programme.

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