

Spiritualism in a material world

What is materialism?

There are two main ways of viewing it.

- a. The idea that goods and wealth are the most important things in life. A person who is said to be materialistic is a person who is focussed on objects, ownership and wealth. He judges success on this factor alone.
- b. A belief that ignores the spiritual world totally.

What is spiritualism?

The belief that the world is made up of two substances, matter and spirit. The belief that there is more to the world than goods and commodities. In religious terms, it is a belief that an afterlife exists.

Material	Spiritual
مادي	روحاني
Brings pleasure to the body	Brings pleasure to the heart
Brings benefit in this world	Brings benefit in both worlds
لذت و شهوت و مزا	سكون و اطمينان
We depend on this	The Awliya depend on this
Onions and lentils	Manna and Salwa
Isaac Newton	William Shakespeare
New York	al-Madina al-Munawwara

Do we live in a materialistic society?

To a large extent, it seems we do live in a materialistic society:

a. Success is largely measured by the amount of money a person earns.

-The youth are fascinated by how much footballers earn per week (note that they earn so much that it is easier to express this per week, rather than the conventional per year).

-The rich and famous are role models in society today, even if they are morally corrupt. Sir Philip Green (Arcadia Group) was accused of racist and sexist behaviour recently. He was held responsible for the collapse of BHS. He is a serial tax dodger. Yet he is still revered. Very few suggested that his knighthood should be returned.

b. Consumerism is rampant in this country.

We have Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Christmas sales, New Year Sales, Easter offers and much more, all aimed at getting people to spend. In 2017, in the United Kingdom alone, £1.39 billion was spent on Black Friday. Religious festivals like Christmas are now associated largely with consumerism.

c. People are not buying according to need, but greed.

Clothes, cars and phones are made today in such a way they will last a lifetime. But this does not serve the capitalist society. So the system gives the impression that the existing goods we have are either 'out-of-fashion' or 'out-of-date.' Nowadays, clothes charity shops are full of products which are perfect. Why do people give them there? Because they are forced to think that their product is 'out of fashion' and 'so last year.' Everyone has a mobile, but the system forces us to buy one anyway, because we will be perceived to be old-fashioned if we do not.

What does Islam say about materialism?

1. Allah says:

وما الحياة الدنيا الا متاع الغرور

The life of this world is only the enjoyment of deception (3: 185).

In other words, the things we see in this world as wonderful, pleasing and beneficial has no weight with Allah. It is all worthless and it is all deceptive.

Sayyiduna Jabir reports that on one occasion, the Prophet (peace be upon him) was with his Companions in a bazaar. He passed by a dead lamb that had short ears, was defective and dead. He asked his Companions, 'who wants to buy this for one Dirham?' They all said no. He then asked, 'will anyone want it for free?' They replied, 'even if it was alive, then we would not want it because it has defective ears. Now that it is dead it is no good.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: In other words, it is worthless.

فوالله ان الدنيا أهون علي الله من هذا عليكم

'This world is more insignificant in the eyes of Allah than this dead lamb.'

When a poor man accidentally drops £5, then he will be quick to reclaim it. When a billionaire drops £5, he perhaps will not give it a second thought. Why? Because in comparison to his riches, £5 is a very insignificant amount. It is a measly amount. In a hadith sharif, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) explained that the only reason the non-Muslims are provided with money, provisions and water in this world is because the world is worthless to Allah. It does not mean anything. If it did, He wouldn't feed the non-Muslims. He would allow them to suffer. After all, they do not even believe in Him. But precisely because this world means nothing to Allah, He

allows them to enjoy, take benefit, eat and drink. The Prophet explained (*Mirqat al-Mafatih*, IX: 374):

لو كانت الدنيا تعدل عند الله جناح بعوضة ما سقى كافرا منها شربة

If the Dunya was worth the wing of a mosquito to Allah, He would not give a non-Muslim a sip to drink.

But precisely because the Dunya is worthless in the eyes of Allah, they receive provisions in this world.

2. Islam warns us that the pursuit of the material is never ending. Materialism never satisfies. Greed simply creates more greed. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) expressed this brilliantly when he said:

لو كان لابن ادم واديان من ذهب لأبتغي ثالثا

'If the son of Adam had two valleys full of gold, he would still want a third.'

Man is never satisfied, no matter how much he accumulates. We see this pattern of the billionaires today, who seek more rather than be content with what they have earned. Their only concern is another billion, to move up the rankings of the *Sunday Times Rich List*. The Qur'an foretold us this very pattern of piling:

الذي جمع مالا و عدده

Those who gather wealth and count it (104: 2).

و تحبون المال حُبًا جَمًّا

And you love wealth with much love! (89: 20).

Enough is never enough for such people. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, said:

يهرم ابن ادم ويشب منه اثنتان الحرص علي المال و الحرص علي العمر

The son of Adam grows old, but two things remain young in him; his desire for a long life and his desire for money.'

Normal people aspire to wear the clothes of the rich and famous. When they finally reach a financial position to do so, the rich and famous simply purchase newer, more expensive brands, so that they once again distance themselves from the ordinary masses. As Edmund Burke, the founder of modern Conservatism put it, 'those who attempt to level never equalise.'

3. Allah has something infinitely better waiting for us in the next world. That is real living and joy. Allah says:

وما هذه الحياة الدنيا الا لهو و لعب و ان الدار الاخرة لهي الحيوان لو كانوا يعلمون

And this life of the world as only amusement and play. Verily the final home, that is the life indeed. If only they knew (29: 64).

All the beauty we see in this world was created by Allah only as a temporary abode. It is a short term home. Then what do you think the permanent abode of Allah will be like?

What is the antidote to materialism?

1. Seek content (*Qana'a*), not riches. Count what you do have rather than what you do not. Living in a global village, this task should be easier since every day, we see images of how unfortunate, poor and hungry the large majority of this world is right now. This should make it easier for us to simply thank Allah for what He has given, rather than lament what we do not have. The Prophet sought refuge from a soul that is never satisfied (و من نفس لا تشبع) In other words, the job of the soul is to be content with what wealth and provisions it has been given. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said:

كن قانعاً تكن أشكر الناس

Be content; you will become the most thankful of people.

2. Seek the spiritual, Allah will automatically give the material too.

a. Sayyida Maryam did not depend on the material but the spiritual. That is why she was given miraculous food directly from Allah in her Mihrab. Zakariyya entered the Mihrab and would find that in winter, she would have summer fruits in front of her, and in summer, she would have winter fruits in front of her. Naturally, he asked:

أني لك هذا قالت هو من عند الله ان الله يرزق من يشاء بغير حساب

Where has this food come from? She said, 'It is from Allah. Certainly Allah provides whomever He wants without measure (3: 37).

b. The Prophet (peace be upon him) rejected the material.

أني عرض عليّ ان تجعل لي بطحاء مكة ذهباً فقلت لا يا رب اجوع يوماً و اشبع يوماً فأما اليوم الذي اجوع فيه فأتضرع إليك و أدعوك و أما اليوم الذي اشبع فيه فاحمدك و اثني عليك (الشفاء، الزهد، ٨٣)

Indeed the valleys of Makka were offered to me in gold. But I said, 'No my Lord! I will be hungry one day and I will eat with satisfaction one day. On the day I am hungry, I will show humility to You and I will pray to you. As for the day I eat, I will thank You and praise You.

As a result, he became the owner of both the material and spiritual:

و اني اعطيت مفاتيح خزائن الارض

And certainly I have been given the keys to the treasures of the earth.

Time and time again, we see people who have devoted their life to serve Islam or humanity. As a result, Allah grants them riches in this world too. When we chase the Dunya, we only get that, if Allah wills. When we chase the afterlife, Allah gives us both. The Qur'an states:

من كان يريد حرث الآخرة نزد له في حرثه و من كان يريد حرث الدنيا نؤته منها و ما له في الآخرة من نصيب

Whosoever desires the reward of the hereafter, We give him increase in his reward. And whosoever desires the reward of this world, We give them thereof, and he has no portion in the Hereafter (42: 20).

3. On closer reflection and inspection, it is actually the spiritual that brings us most peace in this world, not the material. There is a spiritual world out there that is infinitely better than the material. Spiritual satisfaction does not lie in the meal, but the good company you enjoyed with it. Spiritual satisfaction does not lie in the car, but who you travel with. Spiritual satisfaction does not lie in the expensive home and bed, but the ability to sleep well at night.

4. Think about Janna too. Perhaps we are so fixated with the Dunya because we have forgotten that Janna exists. If we thought and fantasised about Janna abundantly, the world around us would be very insignificant. Everything we have here is a pale reflection of what Allah has prepared for us in paradise.

5. Understand the role of money in your life. It is a means not an end. Seeking million has become for many the goal in life. It is merely a stepping stone.

6. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said:

قليل تؤدي شكره خير من كثير لا تطيقه

A small amount for which you are grateful is better than a huge amount than you cannot [express gratitude for].

Perhaps we have an abundance of everything, it leads to waste and disregard for the favour. When it comes to food, water, clothes and so on, look how wasteful we are.

7. Learn to differentiate between the the cost and the value of a commodity. Costing a house is working out what it is worth in pounds on the current market. Valuing it is holding the house dear because it is where your first child was born. A jacket's cost is given in numerical terms. Its value is measure via what it emotionally means to you; a gift from a dear one or the result of your first pay packet. Quite often we buy for the sake of buying and no other reason.

8. Become a billionaire but always think like a Faqir. Never show pride with the money you have. Even if you are billionaire, you are still only a destitute (*Faqir*) in the eyes of Allah. It is He that has given us all. If we think in this manner, then we will never hesitate to spend in the path of Allah.

Conclusion

Is the tide turning? Are people finally realising materialism is not the way forward? Certainly there are indications that spiritualism still has weight in today's society:

*In the last two years, there has been an anti consumerism movement. Black Friday was dubbed 'Buy Nothing Day' or 'Black out Black Friday' by many.

*Clothes/Shoe repair shops are still striving. People still want to repair the old rather than buy a new good. It shows the old holds value to them, though the cost is worthless.

*Crackdown on waste is an act of spiritualism. We are asking more questions about how cars are fuelled, waste packaging and recycling. Caring for the environment is worship. Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) instructed us not to waste water, even if we are at an ocean.

*In 2016, the UK gave £9.6 billion in charity. Charity is an act of the heart. It is an act of spiritualism.

*People are volunteering like never before. 38% of the population formally volunteered at least once in 2017. 22% of people volunteer regularly at least once a month. 'Wanting to do good' is the most popular answer then asked 'why do you volunteer?' Again, volunteering is an act of the heart. It is a spiritual pastime, not a material one.

*We should also derive inspiration from the Awliya Allah (the friends of Allah) and reflect on what they taught, (i) that the nature of this world is very deceptive (ii) success lies in realising this and acting accordingly. When giving advice on the nature of this world, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani said:

“This world is fleeting, transitory. It is the abode of disasters and misfortunes. It can offer no one a life free of care, especially if he is a wise man. As the saying goes, it offers no solace for the eye of the wise man, the eye of one who remembers death. If someone finds himself close up against a lion with its jaws wide open, how can he feel nice and cosy and drop off to sleep? O heedless ones, the grave has its jaws open wide. The lion of death and its serpent have their jaws open wide. The executioner of the Sultan of Destiny has his sword in his hand, as he awaits His command. Only one in a million has this kind of wisdom, vigilant without a trace of negligence.” (*Jala al-Khawatir*, Eighth discourse, Page 68, Al-Baz Publishing, 1997).

Dr. Hafiz Ather Hussain al-Azhari
@hafiz_ather

BA Principles of Theology, al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt.

MA Arabic and Islamic Studies, Dar al-Ulum Muhammadia Ghawsia, Bhera, Pakistan.

BA Political Science, MPhil Theology & PhD Theology, University of Birmingham.