



## *Century of Light*

Keele Campus

The Components of our Wreck

*Second Morning Session (75 minutes)  
9 August 2015*

### 3. Components of Our Wreck

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##### A. Reflecting on Quotations

We agreed in the first workshop that we would start the day today by trying out one way of building reflection on a quotation into our moments of quiet contemplation.

We need to sit comfortably in our chairs, our backs reasonably erect, both feet in contact with the floor and hands lying loosely in our lap. We need to spend a few moments withdrawing our attention from the outside world and instead focusing it on our breathing. This is probably most easily done by resting our full attention on the movement of our diaphragm. At the start, if it helps, we can use our rate of breathing to slow down our inward recitation of the passage we have memorised. When we are alone we can of course recite the passage out loud. If anyone has not yet memorised a passage it is fine to begin this process by reading it slowly and mindfully after settling quietly into a reflective state of mind.

Keeping our breathing steady and even, we should focus our entire attention upon each phrase as we read or recite it. As Easwaran points out (page 32) in his excellent book, in the end we have to find the pace that suits us best: ‘the space between words is a matter for each person to work out individually.... If the words come too close together, you will not be slowing down the mind... If the words stand too far apart, they will not be working together...’

If we find our mind has wandered, we should, without getting irritated with ourselves, begin the passage again at the beginning. This teaches the mind that it cannot get away with wandering: there is a price to pay.

In these early stages we should consider ourselves very successful if we can meditate in this way upon a text for five minutes without losing our concentration. Our aim over a period of months could be to increase their concentration span to something like 20 minutes. Clearly this would enable us, if we wished, to memorise longer passages for reciting, rather than repeating the same short text. It is advisable to change the text we use each week to fend off the indifference which can come from overfamiliarity.

1. Why would regularly experiencing the wisdom captured in words in this way be helpful to us?
2. What was our experience like this time?

#### **Group Work**

**Reminder:** For each group discussion the group should choose a facilitator. It would be best to change the facilitator for each piece of group work over the series of workshops but the group will remain the same. During the consultation, the facilitator’s role is to keep track of the time, to ensure that:

1. everyone contributes something,
2. no one keeps repeating the same point, and
3. no one makes excessively long contributions.

The group also needs to agree who will keep a record of the main points for when there is a report back to everyone at the end of the group consultation. The aim should be to make the report back no longer than five minutes.

#### **Group One Task**

##### **B. The Evidence of a Corrosive Cultural Climate**

Pages 1: The **loss of life alone** has been beyond counting. The **disintegration of basic institutions of social order**, the violation - indeed, **the abandonment - of standards**

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of decency, the **betrayal of the life of the mind through surrender to ideologies** as squalid as they have been empty, the **invention and deployment of monstrous weapons of mass annihilation**, the **bankrupting of entire nations** and the **reduction of masses of human beings to hopeless poverty**, the **reckless destruction of the environment of the planet** – such are the more obvious in a catalogue of horrors unknown to even the darkest of ages past.

This is a powerful indictment of our culture. We need to unpack some of the implications before we can move on to more positive perspectives.

1. Where do we see evidence of ‘the disintegration of basic institutions of social order’ and ‘the abandonment . . . of standards of decency’? Is there an antidote to this process?
2. What do we think is meant by ‘betrayal of the life of the mind through surrender to ideologies as squalid as they have been empty’? How might that best be remedied?
3. Are any of the other points unclear in their implications?

Pages 3-4: The vast majority of the human family, living in lands outside the Western world, shared in few of the blessings and little of the optimism of their European and American brethren. [Refers to China, India, Latin America, & Africa.] . . . Most tragic of all was **the plight of the inhabitants of the African continent**, divided against one another by artificial boundaries created through cynical bargains among European powers. It has been estimated that **during the first decade of the twentieth century over a million people in the Congo perished** - starved, beaten, worked literally to death for the profit of their distant masters, a preview of **the fate that was to engulf well over one hundred million of their fellow human beings across Europe and Asia before the century reached its end.**

These masses of humankind, despoiled and scorned - but representing most of the earth's inhabitants - were seen **not as protagonists but essentially as objects of the new century's much vaunted civilising process.** Despite benefits conferred on a minority among them, the colonial peoples existed chiefly to be acted upon – to be used, trained, exploited, Christianised, civilised, mobilised . . . . To a large extent, **religious and political pieties of various kinds masked both ends and means from the publics in Western lands**, who were thus able to derive moral satisfaction from the blessings their nations were assumed to be conferring on less worthy peoples, while themselves enjoying the material fruits of this benevolence.

*Additional Information:*

In his book *The Bottom Billion* (2007) Paul Collier explains there are at least 58 countries worldwide trapped in poverty, as a result of factors such as incessant conflict or bad governance. The total population of these countries at that time was 980 million people, seventy per cent of whom live in Africa.

*In addition we can factor in the abuse of children in various ways:*

Our children . . . . should not be left to drift in a world so laden with moral dangers. In the current state of society, children face a cruel fate.

- Millions and millions in country after country are dislocated socially.
- Children find themselves alienated by parents and other adults whether they live in conditions of wealth or poverty.
- This alienation has its roots in a selfishness that is born of materialism that is at the core of the godlessness seizing the hearts of people everywhere.

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- The social dislocation of children is in our time a sure mark of a society in decline; this condition is not, however, confined to any race, class, nation or economic condition – it cuts across them all.

It grieves our hearts to realise that in so many parts of the world children are

- employed as soldiers,
- exploited as labourers,
- sold into virtual slavery,
- forced into prostitution,
- made objects of pornography,
- abandoned by parents centred on their own desires, and
- subjected to other forms of victimisation too numerous to mention.

Many such horrors are inflicted by parents themselves upon their own children. The spiritual and psychological damage defies estimation.

(Universal House of Justice: Ridván 2000)

#### **Additional Information from ten years ago:**

26,575 children die every single day. Of the 62 countries making no progress or insufficient progress towards the Millennium Development Goal on child survival, nearly 75 per cent are in Africa. In some countries in southern Africa, the prevalence of HIV and AIDS has reversed previously recorded declines in child mortality. Achieving the goal in these countries will require a concerted effort. Reaching the target means reducing the number of child deaths from 9.7 million in 2006 to around 4 million by 2015. Accomplishing this will require accelerated action on multiple fronts: reducing poverty and hunger (MDG 1), improving maternal health (MDG 5), combating HIV and AIDS, malaria and other major diseases (MDG 6), increasing the usage of improved water and sanitation (MDG 7) and providing affordable essential drugs on a sustainable basis (MDG 8). It will also require a re-examination of strategies to reach the poorest, most marginalized communities.

Trafficking in children is a global problem affecting large numbers of children. Some estimates have as many as 1.2 million children being trafficked every year. There is a demand for trafficked children as cheap labour or for sexual exploitation. Children and their families are often unaware of the dangers of trafficking, believing that better employment and lives lie in other countries. Most child casualties are civilians. But one of the most deplorable developments in recent years has been the increasing use of young children as soldiers. In one sense, this is not really new. For centuries children have been involved in military campaigns—as child ratings on warships, or as drummer boys on the battlefields of Europe. Indeed the word 'infantry', for foot-soldiers, can also mean a group of young people. What is frightening nowadays is the escalation in the use of children as fighters. Recently, in 25 countries, thousands of children under the age of 16 have fought in wars. In 1988 alone, they numbered as many as 200,000. And while children might be thought to be the people deserving greatest protection, as soldiers they are often considered the most expendable. During the Iran-Iraq war, child soldiers, for example, were sent out ahead in waves over minefields.

1. How do you think that we managed to disguise from ourselves the iniquity of what we were doing in all these areas for so long and why has Africa come out of it all so badly?
2. Have we now moved past that period of exploitation, neglect and abuse, or is it still happening? If it is, why does it persist?

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3. If we have moved on to some degree, how did we do it?
4. Why is the harm we have been doing to our children a crucially important issue for us to address urgently, probably as urgently as climate change if not more so?
5. What does all this tell us about the size of the task still ahead, if we are to turn things round completely?

#### Group Two Task

##### C. Materialism

Page 6: Where winds of change did dispel the mists, among the educated classes in Western lands, **inherited orthodoxies were all too often replaced by the blight of an aggressive secularism** that called into doubt both the spiritual nature of humankind and the authority of moral values themselves. Everywhere, **the secularisation of society's upper levels seemed to go hand in hand with a pervasive religious obscurantism among the general population.**

Page 89: Fathered by nineteenth century European thought, acquiring enormous influence through **the achievements of American capitalist culture**, and **endowed by Marxism with the counterfeit credibility peculiar** to that system, **materialism emerged full-blown in the second half of the twentieth century as a kind of universal religion** claiming absolute authority in both the personal and social life of humankind. Its creed was simplicity itself. **Reality** - including human reality and the process by which it evolves - **is essentially material in nature.** The goal of human life is, or ought to be, **the satisfaction of material needs** and wants. Society exists to facilitate this quest, and the collective concern of humankind should be an ongoing refinement of the system, aimed at rendering it ever more efficient in carrying out its assigned task.

Page 135: There has not been a society in the history of the world, no matter how pragmatic, experimentalist and multiform it may have been, that did not derive its thrust from **some foundational interpretation of reality.** Such a system of thought reigns today virtually unchallenged across **the planet, under the nominal designation "Western civilisation".** Philosophically and politically, it presents itself as a kind of **liberal relativism; economically and socially, as capitalism** - two value systems that have now so adjusted to each other and become so mutually reinforcing as to constitute virtually a single, comprehensive world-view.

Appreciation of the benefits - in terms of the personal freedom, social prosperity and scientific progress enjoyed by a significant minority of the Earth's people - cannot withhold a thinking person from recognizing that **the system is morally and intellectually bankrupt.** It has contributed its best to the advancement of civilisation, as did all its predecessors, and, like them, is **impotent to deal with the needs of a world never imagined by the eighteenth century prophets who conceived most of its component elements.** Shoghi Effendi did not limit his attention to divine right monarchies, established churches or totalitarian ideologies when he posed the searching question: "Why should these, in a world subject to the immutable law of change and decay, be exempt from the deterioration that must needs overtake every human institution?"

Page 136: Tragically, what Bahá'ís see in present-day society is **unbridled exploitation of the masses of humanity by greed that excuses itself as the operation of "impersonal market forces".** What meets their eyes everywhere is the destruction of moral foundations vital to humanity's future, through **gross self-indulgence**

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masquerading as "freedom of speech". What they find themselves struggling against daily is the pressure of a **dogmatic materialism**, claiming to be **the voice of "science"**, that **seeks systematically to** exclude from intellectual life all impulses arising from the spiritual level of human consciousness.

These are key paragraphs for us to understand thoroughly if we are to grasp the importance and true nature of a more spiritual path forward.

#### **Additional Information:**

Just as there is a fundamental difference between divine Revelation itself and the understanding that believers have of it, so also there is a basic distinction between scientific fact and reasoning on the one hand and the conclusions or theories of scientists on the other. There is, and can be, no conflict between true religion and true science: true religion is revealed by God, while it is through true science that the mind of man "discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings" and "comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete". However, whenever a statement is made through the lens of human understanding it is thereby limited, for human understanding is limited; and where there is limitation there is the possibility of error; and where there is error, conflicts can arise.

(*A Compilation on Scholarship: [Baha'i Reference Library](#)*)

Medina, in his book *Faith, Physics & Psychology*, explains that he sees the current worldview as destructively rooted in the thinking of Descartes and Newton. He refers to it throughout as the 'Cartesian-Newtonian worldview.' Descartes split mind from body, which he considered to be a machine. He considered that all true understanding derived from analysis (splitting into components) and logic. Add to this Newton's determinism (we can predict anything from our knowledge both of its starting state and the operation of immutable universal laws) and, in Medina's view, we have the current, in his view pernicious, Cartesian-Newtonian worldview (page 14):

. . . . this classical science worldview is based on a mechanistic view of human beings and the universe that alienates human beings from their spiritual, moral, and emotional faculties. It has divided the world into mutually exclusive opposing forces: the dichotomies of science versus religion, reason versus faith, logic versus intuition, natural versus supernatural, material versus spiritual, and secular versus sacred. The result is a materialistic worldview that emphasises the truth of science, reason, logic, the natural, the material, and the secular while ignoring or even denigrating the truth of religion, faith, intuition, the supernatural, the spiritual, and the sacred.

Medina goes on to unpack what for him at least are the limitations of 'secular spirituality' which (page 94) 'do not necessarily promote an altruistic social ethic or a desire on the part of individuals to improve society for the benefit of all.' He includes 'religious fundamentalism' (page 95-96) under this umbrella 'because it represents an attempt to use religion as a vehicle to fulfil worldly desires for leadership or power or as a justification for ungodly acts such as forced conversion of pagans or warfare against infidels.'

He goes on to state that our version of Christianity has contributed to the problems the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview creates (page 129) as a result of its concept of 'an all-transcendent God Who is essentially divorced from the cursed natural world.' He concludes (pages 129-30):

It is my belief that an extremist form of Christian theism actually worked hand-in-hand with the Cartesian-Newtonian worldview to promulgate a false sense of separation between the spiritual and the material and between the sacred and the secular.

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It is important to stress that he is not criticising the true essence of Christianity here, simply some of its more extreme distortions with their destructive consequences.

For those interested in a more mainstream Christian take on the matter see *God, Humanity & the Cosmos* (Southgate et al: pages 95-98): they too conclude that a mechanical view of the world prevailed as a result of the success of this Descartes/Newton fusion, and this then negatively affected economics and political theory as well as religion and our view of ourselves.

1. Why do we think secularism and religious obscurantism might go hand in hand in the way described here?
2. What are the achievements of American capitalism and what makes them so persuasive given the damage the system seems to be causing?
3. How can materialism, dogmatic or otherwise, be effectively a religion? What are the parallels?
4. What is 'liberal relativism' and how has it been fostered by a materialist world view? How does this philosophical and moral approach make such a perfect marriage with capitalism? Do we agree that this arrangement is bankrupt?
5. Are market forces not really impersonal?
6. Are science and materialism not really in tune?

**Report Back:** *One member of each group explains their conclusions and what they have learnt. Their group members can join in to field whatever questions and comments come their way.*

#### D. Compensating Accomplishments

Pages 4-5: To point out the failings of a great civilisation is not to deny its accomplishments. As the twentieth century opened, the peoples of the West could take justifiable pride in the **technological, scientific and philosophical developments** for which their societies had been responsible. . . . A continuous process of **discovery, design and improvement** was making accessible **power of unimaginable magnitude** - with, alas, **ecological consequences** equally unimagined at the time - especially through the use of cheap fuel and electricity.

Page 5: Changes taking place at the deeper level of scientific thought were even more far-reaching in their implications. The nineteenth century had still been held in the grip of the **Newtonian view of the world as a vast clockwork system**, but by the end of the century the intellectual strides necessary to challenge that view had already been taken. New ideas were emerging that would lead to **the formulation of quantum mechanics**; and before long the revolutionising effect **of the theory of relativity would call into question beliefs about the phenomenal world that had been accepted as common sense for centuries.**

1. How do we feel about the advantages they quote? Why aren't they enough to turn our society round and avert the crisis towards which we seem to be hurtling?
2. In what ways do we think new scientific paradigms may have changed our perspective on reality?

#### E. Where now?

. . . . As the twentieth century opened, Western civilisation was reaping the fruits of a philosophical culture that was rapidly liberating the energies of its populations, and whose influence would soon produce a revolutionary impact throughout the entire world.