

Addressing Extremes of Poverty and Wealth: A Spiritual Challenge

P. Farhangpour

*University of Venda, South Africa
E-mail: parvanehfar@gmail.com*

KEYWORDS Paradigm Lift. Oneness Paradigm. Extremist Culture. Inequality. Spirituality. Falling Ideologies. Rising Ideologies.

ABSTRACT The world today is characterised by a wide divide between the rich and the poor. On the one hand about half the world's population (three billion people) live on less than \$2.50 a day, with one billion people living on less than \$1.00 per day. Worldwide about eight hundred million people suffer from malnutrition and over twenty one thousand children die of hunger each day. On the other hand the wealth of a very few billionaires is equal to the total wealth of two and a half billion of the world poorest people. Oxfam predicts that by 2016, if no changes are made to stop the divide, the total wealth of 1 percent of the world's population will be equal to the aggregate wealth of the remaining 99 percent. The figures are staggering and emphasise the suffering of the masses and the global tragedy that humanity is facing. This theoretical paper examines the ideologies responsible for the widening and deepening gap between rich and poor and the creation of 'extremist culture'. It also identifies the need for reassessment of old values and a 'Paradigm Lift'. It proposes a 'Oneness Paradigm' model based on the principles of spirituality, justice, equality, and education. It recommends a new outlook on money and prosperity to counter the present day extremist mind-set.

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is not a new phenomenon. Throughout history people have struggled to survive and improve their conditions. But never before has the divide between rich and poor been so great.

Half of the world's population (three billion people) live on less than \$2.50 a day (Shah 2014) and one sixth of the world's population (one billion people) live on less than one dollar per day (Ashton 2014). According to UNICEF (Shah 2014), twenty one thousand children die due to poverty each day, thirty million people die of hunger each year and eight hundred million suffer from malnutrition. One-third of all people in developing countries lack sufficient drinking water, and 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation (Shah 2013). In contrast there are an estimated 1,645 billionaires world-wide, a number that has more than doubled since 2013. Their wealth is estimated to grow by \$668 million each day. At the start of 2014 the world's 85 richest people owned as much as the total of the poorest half of humanity (Even It Up 2015). Dolan and Kroll (2015) suggest even higher estimates; reporting that in spite of the recent turndown in global economic activity there are 1,826 billionaires with an average net worth of \$7.5 trillion.

The extreme of wealth and poverty is a global problem and covers most countries of the world from UK to India, from US to Nigeria; no country is immune. In Sub-Saharan Africa, sixteen billionaires live alongside three hundred and sixty million extremely poor people (Shah 2013). In South Africa similar trends are noted; Statistics South Africa (2014) reports that 20.2 percent of South Africans are living below the poverty line of \$1.25 a day and 36.4 percent are living on less than \$2.50 a day. In respect of living conditions, 58 percent of the South Africans live in urban areas, of them 33 percent live in slums and squatter camps; this is in spite of the fact that South Africa has the highest average individual wealth on the continent (Magwaza 2014). Recently 702 (2014) reported that in terms of wealth South Africa is the most unequal country in the world - the total wealth of South Africa's two richest people is equal to the combined wealth of the poorest 26.5 million people; or to put it more bluntly two people's wealth is equal to that of the poorer half of the population.

These statistics show that unlike at any time in history the gap between rich and poor has never been greater; and this gap is rapidly widening. The extreme divide between rich and poor is not only iniquitous but contrary to every human's right to basic living conditions and equal opportunities. Inequality has far-reaching con-

sequences on many different human rights including education, health care and career opportunities. Lack of these rights results in a vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation. In stark contrast the wealthy suffer no such deprivation and when needs be they can manipulate the system to their benefit. Additionally extremes of wealth and poverty has a negative impact on the economy, social security, causes social division, discord, criminality, unrest, conflict and instability (Khazan 2013). Winnie Byanyima the Executive Director of Oxfam International warned that by 2016 the combined wealth of the world's richest 1 percent would exceed that of the remaining 99 percent (Byanyima 2015). Humanity is facing a crisis that needs urgent attention (Sandel 2014). Jay Naidoo, the chair of the Partnership Council explained the significance of the problem at hand: "*Rising inequalities has become the greatest threat to world peace, and indeed the human species*" (Even It Up 2015).

Objectives

Solving the challenges of these inequalities is complex and requires much reflection and debate. It requires urgent action from world leaders as well as ordinary members of society. This paper is a contribution to the deliberations on this vitally important topic. Two objectives were defined to:

- ♦ Identify ideologies that played a role in the growth of the extremes of wealth and poverty; and
- ♦ Offer an ideological model aimed at reducing the inequality brought about by the extremes of wealth and poverty.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

Ideologies That Have Played a Role in the Growth of the Extremes of Wealth and Poverty

A brief examination of the ideologies which have influenced the course of world history during the past few decades is important as they have either directly or indirectly influenced many government's policies, the choice of economic systems, and more importantly people's thoughts and values. People act based on what they think is important and make choices based on their "outlook on life" (Schumacher in Bjonnes 2011).

During the last century ideologies of materialism, capitalism, consumerism, and individualism have dominated and shaped people's attitude and behaviour towards wealth and poverty.

Materialism

One of the most dominant and influential ideologies is materialism. Materialism is one of the oldest philosophies which originated in Greece in the 6th and 5th centuries BC. Many centuries later, in mid 19th century, materialism was revived by Karl Marks. As a result of his influence materialistic ideas became increasingly widespread and influenced many nations' economic systems. For a materialist the ultimate goal in life is to produce wealth and to have material comfort. Materialism has played an important role in the growth of global business, trade and economies during the last few decades. It has significantly contributed to the advancement in science and technology ushering an era of material prosperity and wealth production worldwide (White 1998; Materialism 2014). Prosperity and wealth which are associated with materialism made it a popular life-view among the masses both the poor and the rich.

Today the world of media and advertisements promotes materialism and creates the impression that people's worth depends on their material belongings. Luxury homes, cars, clothes and jewellery manifest the value people attach to objects. Monbiot (2013) associates materialism with sense of "void", low self-esteem, unhappiness and loneliness, whereby the individual seeks to fulfil their psychological need through collecting objects. Monbiot believes that materialism make people less empathetic, less caring and self-centred. It also provokes jealousy and comparison with others. Kasser (2014) in his research found a correlation between materialism and the extent of compulsive consumption. He also found that materialism is associated with lower levels of well-being, and anxiety, qualities that we find common in our modern day materialistic societies. But above all materialism has been criticised for a life focussed on accumulation of material wealth and self-centred love for money (Dogra 2011). Others have criticised materialists for a disbelief in the existence of God and a soul, and ignoring the spiritual reality. As far as extreme of wealth and poverty are concerned materialism promotes obsession for ac-

cumulation of wealth, and it ignores the values of caring for others, thus sustaining and fostering an increase in inequality and extremes of wealth and poverty.

Capitalism

The concepts of Capitalism started early in 20th century and is associated with Max Weber, a German philosopher and economist. According to Weber (2005), the highest form of moral obligation of the individual is to fulfil his duty in worldly affairs by pursuing profit for its own sake. Capitalism operates on principles of democracy and freedom. It promotes free competition, free market, supply and demand, and leadership autonomy. Private ownership, and accumulation of property are encouraged and one is not ashamed to be rich and have lots of money. Capitalism has been associated with greed and selfishness as anything may be sacrificed for the sake of making a profit. Capitalism is blamed for social class divisions and the widening gap between rich and poor (Capitalism vs. Communism 2015). On the positive side capitalism promotes efficiency, hard work, capital growth and freedom to grow; qualities that promote economic growth and industrialisation. Like materialism, capitalist views became widely spread and influenced economic systems around the world. Capitalism in conjunction with materialism seems to have paved the way for the creation of extreme wealth and prosperity which consequently has led to extreme inequality.

Consumerism and Individualism: The By-products of Materialism and Capitalism

In addition to materialistic and capitalistic ideologies, our world is characterised by consumeristic and individualistic views and attitudes, both of which are seen to be the by-products of materialism and capitalism.

Consumerism relates to having the power to purchase. The more one can purchase the more powers the person has. Consumerism makes people value themselves and others according to their worth in terms of income and consumption (Consumerism 2014) at the cost of neglecting other human values. In a capitalist society people buy goods not based on what they need but to fulfil their craving to buy.

Moreover materialism and capitalism affect people's relationship with one another. Greed and focus on accumulation of wealth lead people to become self-centred and isolated from others. People prioritise their personal happiness, pleasure, and independence over the communal goals (Individualism 2014). Individualism is believed to cause gradual loss of caring feelings for other people and even for giving into brutality and injustice (Mayson 2002). These qualities in turn seem to make people indifferent towards social inequalities and human misery which we often observe in our present societies.

Emerging of 'Extremist Culture' and Breakdown in Spiritual Values

The dominance of materialism, capitalism, consumerism, and individualism have led to the emergence of a new type of society characterised by a culture of inequalities and extremes; what the researcher calls the 'extremist culture'. In such a society the excessively rich and the excessively poor live side by side, both competing for accumulation of wealth. Typically, the 'super rich' live in their mansions and the poor live in their shacks perhaps not very far from each other. Living in such unequal environment where both are aware of the inequalities they often develop feelings of mistrust, and suspicion towards each other (Horowitz 2012). Experience has shown that living in these conditions over time can make the rich to develop an apathy towards the poor, in turn the poor develop a sense of resentment and envy toward the rich (Tang et al. 2012). In such a society, social divisions are formed and each group lives a separate life from the other. In extremist societies the rich concentrate on gaining more material wealth whereas the poor concentrate on surviving another day. In such an environment people aspire for 'fast-richness'; wanting to become rich overnight without wanting to engage in the hard work required, and even resorting to unethical means to achieve their goals (Tang et al. 2012; Sandel 2014). In such situations material achievements are acquired at the cost of ignoring and even breaking spiritual values, thus the imbalance between the material and the spiritual, and the imbalance between the mind and the heart (Barker 1995; White 1998; Sharma 2007).

Need For Reflection and Re-assessment

In spite of all the technological and scientific advancements of the last century, extreme poverty and inequality have exacerbated. Mankind faces two of its greatest challenges; lifting half the world's population out of the cycle of poverty and bringing about a more equitable distribution of opportunities. As important as they are, aid and sustainable development programmes offered by international and national agencies have not offered lasting solutions (Shah 2014). Never before has humanity witnessed the massive gap between the rich and the poor to the degree that we see today. Moreover, the ideologies of materialism and capitalism and the economic systems they inspired that brought prosperity to so many during the last few decades now seem redundant and even harmful to mankind. Humanistic and spiritual values have lost their priority and the culture of extremes is creating uncertainty, insecurity, terrorism, unrest, social instability and a general lack of contentment (Posner 2014). The situation is critical we need to pause and reflect on what we need to do as humanity. The 1952 quote by Brunton (1952: 34) is still relevant today. He said:

"The hour has come to wake to what we have done to ourselves, to what a one-sided science and an icy intellectualism have done to us, and to seek a balance which will rest on them, yes, but also on faith and intuition."

An Ideological Model to Reduce Inequality The Need for Paradigm 'Lift' and Oneness Paradigm Model

The conclusions thus far indicate to us that humanity has outgrown the materialism, capitalism, consumerism and individualism (what the researcher calls 'the falling ideologies') and is now in urgent need of new ideologies and outlooks on life (what the researcher names 'the rising ideologies'). What humanity needs today, the researcher proposes, is a 'Paradigm Lift' whereby people lift themselves up from the materialist, capitalist, consumerist and individualist outlook on life to a higher paradigm that reverses these ideologies; a concept termed the 'Oneness Paradigm'.

The Oneness Paradigm requires abandoning the constraining views which divides humanity into categories and divisions. We need to stop

comprehending people based on their differences but rather concentrate on what unites us. It is time for us to socially unite and view each other not according to race, gender, nationality, developed or underdeveloped; but to rise above the parochial and think universally (Application of Universal Oneness 2015). If we understand and acknowledge that in spite of all of these differences, humans are a single species and that our destiny is inextricably interconnected then will we see the world and its problems in a different light. Singh in one of his lectures explained the concept of oneness profoundly:

... "that the planet we inhabit and of which we are all citizens – Planet Earth – is a single, living, pulsating entity; that the human race in the final analysis is an interlocking, extended family ... and that the differences of race and religion, nationality and ideology, sex and sexual preference, economic and social status – though significant in themselves – must be viewed in the broader context of global unity" (Singh 1996: 226).

The Oneness Paradigm requires a global consciousness and a vision based on the realisation that all peoples are members of one family, "*the family of humankind*" (Bahá'í 1995). Moreover, technological and scientific advances have broken down many of the barriers that now make it possible for us to operate at global level to resolve the challenges that face humankind. The adoption of the Oneness Paradigm is not only justified, but is necessary to provide a solution for human survival (Bahá'í International 1995; Even It Up 2015).

Principles of the Oneness Paradigm

The principle of the oneness of humanity requires major changes in people's outlook on life and reviving qualities and principles that promote the theory and practice of oneness of humankind the 'Rising ideology'. The following principles are recommended:

Spirituality

Spirituality in most cases refers to one's sense of meaning and a purpose in life; a sense of connectedness; awareness; and for some people means religion (Egan et al. 2011; Burkhardt 1989). It also has the attributes of search for

meaning, feelings of love, interconnectedness with others, and longing for peace and harmony. The following quote by Singh (in Harbhajan 2014) on the significance of spirituality in addressing human affairs is applicable:

“There is one hope for the world, and this hope lies in the spiritual link from man to man and nation to nation. This genuine hope will bring us together. The problems of the world are not of political, but of spiritual nature, so people have to find the solution on the spiritual level, on the level of consciousness. The change will begin from man’s heart.”

Reviving spirituality can play a crucial role in addressing the extremes of wealth and poverty and provide a means to prevent the continued loss of life through starvation. The concept of a universal family will allow us to develop a love for fellow human beings and mutually care for our common destiny. The quote by Bahá’u’lláh still stands true: *“Take pride not in love for yourselves but in love for your fellow-creatures. Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind.”* (Writings of Bahá’u’lláh 1986: 240). If there is a genuine love for other human beings, investing time and effort to bring back balance and harmony to our societies it would not be difficult. We would each be willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of well-being of others as we see them as equals entitled to a dignified life. Moreover, we recognize that as members of a single global family, the suffering of any member of the family will affect us all. For our own well-being and for the sake of lasting happiness we need to care for other human beings and our common future.

The principle of spirituality is not just theoretical; it has practical benefits for human affairs. Research has shown that a higher degree of spirituality is beneficial in improving people’s attitude towards economic matters and decreases excessive spending (Zsolnai 2007; Stillman et al. 2012). Karakas’ (2009) review of 140 studies on spirituality confirmed that spirituality has positive effect on employees’ performance and effectiveness. Moreover, other researchers such as Egan et al. (2011) and Puchalski (2012) found that spirituality has a positive effect on various aspects of health and well-being.

Justice

Oneness and unity of humankind will not be possible unless there is justice. Throughout

history injustice has been a source of conflict. Extremes of wealth and poverty, where masses are deprived of the necessities of life whilst others live in excess, are a manifestation of injustice. According to Even It Up report (2015), one of the main reason for the present unrest and conflict in the world is inequality and injustice. It is crucial that the concept of justice is well understood and is infused not only in government policies but also in the daily lives of individuals and in their interactions with each other.

Equality

Another principle necessary for application of oneness and unity in the world is equality. Equal access to basic nutrition, shelter, health care, social services, and education are found in the constitutions of most democratic nations. Yet it is well known that a large majority of the world’s population (especially women) are deprived of these basic rights.

Unequal treatment of woman stifles the proper development of half the world’s population. When women lack adequate opportunities for development and growth, inevitably the whole humanity suffers the consequences as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1922: 375) explained in the following quote:

“Until womankind reaches the same degree as man, until she enjoys the same arena of activity, extraordinary attainment for humanity will not be realized; humanity cannot wing its way to heights of real attainment.”

Universal Education

Education is a key to achieving oneness and unity. Living in a divided world, we are used to the culture of divisions and suspicions. Such a mind-set has to change and a new culture based on trust, fellowship and unity should be established. However, change should start with the individual. Unless individuals believe in the oneness of humanity and infuse it in all their interactions and decisions, the principle of oneness will remain an ideal. Families need to teach their children about unity and oneness, eliminating all sorts of prejudices and discrimination. If oneness qualities are learned at home, then they will be carried over into society where relevant policies are designed and implemented. Schools

curriculums need to include teaching children about oneness of humanity, love, peace, and unity. Children need to see other human beings as their equals and their problems and wellbeing as their own. Oxfam's Curriculum for Global Citizenship (2006) and Unity-Based Peace Education program (Danish 2008) are examples of such curricula. Concepts of global citizenship and oneness of humanity are progressively receiving more attention. Global citizenship and education for oneness of humanity have been a part of the agenda of the United Nations and was deliberated on during IPS forum of 2014. Members displayed a common vision about the important role that education can play in reshaping humanity from one of conflict to one of harmony and peace. They proposed that young people get trained to become "*agents of peace*" (Jaeger 2014).

New Outlook on Money, Wealth and Purpose of Wealth

Accepting the principle of oneness of humanity requires the reintroduction of spiritual principles into economic thinking and practice to create a balance between the material and the spiritual. (Karakas 2009) suggests a shift from a strictly economic focus to a balance of profits, quality of life, social justice, work, and family. Such a shift requires redefining money, wealth, and the purpose of wealth.

Money on its own is neither 'good' nor 'evil', it depends on how it's been used. Tang (2010) refers to two possible functions of money; money as a tool and money as a drug. Money becomes a tool when it is used to achieve other goals for example to satisfy needs, but it becomes a drug when it becomes an obsession in life. To bring back some degree of balance and spirituality into money, money needs to be seen as a tool to achieve higher personal and social goals such as education, agriculture, trade, industry, health, and welfare.

The notion of prosperity and wealth also needs to be reviewed (Enderle 2014). Seid (2014) recommends a shift from using standard of living as a yard-stick to measure prosperity to general well-being and life fulfilment. In this sense, wealth would not be mere material possessions but a combination of life achievements in various facets of life including the material, physical, social and spiritual progress (Life Optimizer 2014); in short the quality of life (Zsolnai 2007).

Prosperity in some traditional cultures is interpreted in terms of strength of character, knowledge, wisdom, generosity, and courage regardless of the degree of material wealth (Barker 1995). Moving the focus from money to human qualities might help in improving moral values, reducing corruption and crediting people based on *who* they are rather than *what* they own. The purpose of wealth in the Oneness Paradigm would be to meet the necessities of life and spending it for spiritually uplifting the individual as well as the community (Sharma 2007). In this sense wealth becomes the means to facilitate the achievement of greater personal and communal goals.

CONCLUSION

A prerequisite to any global transformation is to have a united vision and a universal consciousness about the future of our planet and humanity as a whole. At this stage in the history of humanity, consciousness about the oneness of mankind is essential to address the problem of the extremes of wealth and poverty. Inequality affects the whole of humanity and therefore should be a concern for all.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, an attempt was made to conceptualise the causes of the extremes of wealth and poverty and offer a theoretical model to address the gap. The researcher is well aware of the limitations of this study and the proposed model. However, she hopes that the reading of this paper ignites a debate on this important topic and motivates some to conduct further research on the proposed model.

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