

THE MATERIAL FACE OF HUMANISM

Robert L. Waggoner¹

Strictly speaking, materialism is the belief that matter is all that exists. In this absolute sense, materialism makes no distinction between matter and mind. It holds that the mental faculty in man is but an extension of the physical. In this sense, materialism is a part of naturalism. However, the term ‘materialism’ is generally used in a much looser, and more practical sense. In a practical sense, a materialist is one who *acts* like matter is all there is. Most people will deny, if asked, that matter is all there is. However, many people act in ways inconsistent with what they say they believe.

For example, if you had asked Moses if obedience is necessary and if he believed what God said, he would surely have said ‘yes’. And to his credit, Moses generally acted that way. However, on one occasion, God instructed Moses to speak to a rock and promised him that then water would come from the rock for Israel and their cattle. Moses was on this occasion no doubt exasperated by the constant complaining of the Israelites. At any rate, he struck the rock twice and spoke to the people, rather than speak to the rock as God had commanded. In so doing Moses did not obey God. The reason that Moses did not obey is, as God himself said, “because you did not believe me, to hallow me in the eyes of the children of Israel . . .” (Numbers 20:1-13).

In like manner, whether or not a person says he believes that matter is all there is, he is a materialist if, practically speaking, materialism is a way of living which places total confidence in material possessions. A materialist is one who seeks to acquire material goods because he believes that his quality of life is determined by the quantity of his material possessions. A materialist trusts in his material possessions to satisfy his needs rather than trusting in God or some other source of power. Moreover, practically speaking, a materialist is one who acts like man is only a physical, material being. By his actions, a materialist denies the existence of man’s spiritual nature.

Materialists In The Bible

The rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22) who asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life was a materialist. When Jesus told him to sell all he had, give to the poor, and then follow Jesus, the rich young ruler refused because “he had great possessions” (Matthew 19:22). He trusted his material possessions to satisfy his needs. His actions demonstrated that in this life he did not believe that Jesus could satisfy his needs apart from his material riches. He acted like he was only physical, not also spiritual.

Likewise, Jesus’ parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21) is about a rich man who thought he could meet all his needs with material goods. That’s why Jesus called him a fool. The rich fool acted as if he did not realize he had a spiritual nature and spiritual needs. Jesus had prefaced

¹Copyright © by Robert L. Waggoner, 1988. Revised, 2000. Permission is granted to reproduce and distribute this material for non-commercial educational purposes whenever unaltered and copyright and author’s name are given. All other rights reserved.

his parable with the statement that “one’s life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses” (Luke 12:15).

Goals Of Materialists

From a biblical perspective, there is nothing wrong with materials or with material possessions. However, it is wrong to *rely* upon material possessions to satisfy all the needs of life. It is wrong because God requires faith in Him to meet the needs of life (Hebrews 11:6), which is impossible if faith is placed in material possessions or mammon (Matthew 6:24).

If asked, many people would declare that man has a spiritual nature. At the same time, however, they may be directing all their goals toward the acquisition of material goods for physical benefits only. By their actions, they indicate belief that the quality of their lives depends upon the quantity of material goods they accumulate. In a practical sense, matter is their god! They may claim to be believers in God, but in reality they are practical atheists!

Materialists are goal oriented toward acquiring material things. They look only to themselves or to civil governments to supply the material needs and comforts of life. They are either willfully ignorant, or neglectfully unmindful, of the spiritual needs and blessings of life. By their actions, materialists deny the reality and importance of spiritual things. They deny the relevancy of God to man. Materialists do not consider that God is man’s creator, provider, sustainer, lawgiver, savior, lord, judge and rewarder or punisher.

Materialists are goal oriented toward fulfilling temporal human desires of the flesh. They are not so much concerned about love, joy peace, patience, and other spiritual experiences such as kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, etc., as they are about creature comforts derived from wealth, physical pleasures gained from food, drink, and sexual gratification, or self-esteem based upon personal achievement, fame, or power.

Materialists are not goal oriented toward the divinely declared reality of an everlasting existence in either heaven or hell. Having made no preparations for everlasting life with God, they are destined to everlasting torment and punishment where they will be separated from all that is good and holy, and be confined always to that which is evil and horrible (Matthew 25:31-46; John 5:28-29).

Nature of Materialists

Character

Materialists are interested primarily in themselves. They are, by their very nature, selfish. The rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22), the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), the rich man who refused scraps from his table to be given to Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), the priest and the Levite on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho (Luke 10:30-35), and the elder brother (Luke 15:25-32) were all selfish. They demonstrated by their speech and conduct that they were materialistic. Materialism supports modern humanism by its concerns with self and temporal existence.

The opposite of materialism is unselfishness and compassionate charity. Compassion seeks to relieve physical and spiritual needs of others. The compassionate are commended by God (Matthew 25:31-40; Matthew 10:42). Jesus was compassionate (Matthew 9:36). The apostles taught compassion (Galatians 6:2). Compassion has been a mark of Christian conduct from the earliest days of Christianity.

Morality

Materialists have no certain sense of morality. If matter is all there is, then a man's success in life must be evaluated in terms of his accumulation and use of material things. And if matter is all there is, then the manner by which a man acquires material things is relatively unimportant. Morals are then but a means to an end, having no definite values within themselves. Materialists may therefore determine for themselves whether morals have values, and if so, what they may be.

On the other hand, if matter is not all there is, if man does indeed have an everlasting soul, then success in life must be measured in terms of one's spiritual well being, his relationship with God, and his preparation for everlasting existence apart from his physical body. And if matter is not all there is, then man may not determine for himself the manner by which he acquires and uses material things. Rather, the manner for acquiring wealth is prescribed by God. Man's acquisitions and uses of material things must be according to God as set forth in his written word.

Causes And Consequences Of Materialism

Christians in America now find themselves living in an extremely materialistic environment. All other values appear to be secondary to acquiring massive amounts of money in order to enjoy abundant physical pleasures and creature comforts. Reasons for American's current enchantment with materialism may be attributed to many factors – most of which have had detrimental repercussions on Christianity and the family.

Industrialization

Historically, materialism gained strong support from the industrialization of the western world. With the beginning of the industrial age, men turned more intensively toward money making pursuits, and therefore tended to give decreasingly less attention to the spiritual welfare of their families.

Whereas fathers once worked with their wives and children in agriculture or other family businesses, they now began to leave their families every day for financial employment elsewhere. As they did, their spiritual influence in their families diminished. As men became more preoccupied with businesses, their materialistic greed produced numerous social ills, most of which related to the deterioration of families. One researcher has declared that "the most dominant cause for the . . . break up of the family . . . was the fact that the *men of America*

became almost completely preoccupied with money-making and building a great industrial culture."²

Advertising

As materialistic pursuits increased, consumer goods were produced in larger varieties and quantities. Advertising also stimulated the desires of society to want more and more. Men worked long hours to make enough money to fulfill the desires of their families. Being gone from home most of the daylight hours, men left the spiritual welfare of their families to wives and mothers. It follows that the influence of fathers began to wane, while that of mothers became, for most practical and spiritual purposes, the heads of their families. Fathers now spent very little time with their children. One study of "middle-class fathers of one-year old infants found that they spent an average of only 20 minutes a day with their babies. When a recording microphone was attached to each infant's chest, the data indicated that in terms of true, intimate interaction between father and child the average daily time together was 38 seconds."³

When the time came that men could not by themselves earn sufficient funds for family desires, then their wives also had to seek employment away from their children. While materialism is not the only reason American women have joined the labor force, it is surely the predominate one. Note the statistical increase of women in the work force over the last one hundred years. "In 1890, less than 5 percent of all American wives worked outside the home for wages and salaries. By 1940 this figure had increased to 17 percent, but the most dramatic increases followed World War II. In 1947, 20 percent, or one out of every five married women was employed in the labor force. The proportion rose to one in four (25 percent) by 1950, one in three (32 percent) by 1960, and one out of two (48 percent) by 1980."⁴ Two thirds of all wives are now in the labor force.

Materialism has thus contributed to removing men from the headship of their families. It has thrust the leadership of families upon women, (a role God did not intend for them to perform), and then it has burdened women with employment outside their homes and away from their husbands and children.

Public Schools

Another cause for America's obsession with money is the fact that our public schools are now geared to promote materialistic rather than spiritual values. The purpose of education is generally declared to be that of instructing people how to make a living. In order to be a productive, tax-paying citizen, a benefit rather than a burden to society, people must be taught, it is said, in order that they can get jobs and make money. To get better jobs, more education is

²Carl W. Wilson, *Our Dance Has Turned To Death*, [Living Books, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. 1979], 53, emphasis by original author.

³Urie Bronfenbrenner, "The Disturbing Changes in the American Family," *Search*, Fall, 1976 [as reprinted in *The Journal Of Christian Reconstruction*, IV, Winter, 1977-78], quoted by John W. Whitehead, *The Stealing Of America*, [Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1983], 66, emphasis by original author.

⁴Lenore J. Weitzman, "Changing Families, Changing Laws," *Family Advocate*, [Summer, 1982], 6, quoted by John W. Whitehead, *The Stealing Of America*, 63.

needed, therefore young people are encouraged to get a college education. They are often given statistics that shows that college graduates make more money than high school graduates.

In the name of secularization, modern public education recognizes only the material and the physical. By avoiding awareness of the spiritual nature of humanity, public education implies that matter is all there is, that the 'good life' must be lived here and now, that there is no life after death, and that therefore students should enable themselves by their education to acquire all they can while they can.

Loss Of Personal Identity

For many, a much more recent cause for America's enchantment with material possessions seems to be a growing loss of identity and a diminishing sense of personal worth. Our nation has been shifting from a Christian value system to a humanistic value system. It is also shifting from an industrial society to an information society. Radical social and economic changes are taking place. We live in an age of corporate take-overs. People feel insecure in their employment. Most Americans move from one community to another a least once every five years. People therefore feel little sense of community stability or belonging. Families are deteriorating and breaking apart. Divorce rates in America are the highest of any nation in the world.

More than a third of the couples first married in the 1970's have now divorced. More than a third of the children born in the 1970's have spent part of their childhood living with a single parent. The emotional consequences of this trend upon both adults and children are proportionately large and suggest that in the future our society will become increasingly unstable and insecure.

People no longer feel secure and protected by traditional social and economic structures that once provided security. All this produces an identity crisis that too often results in people thinking that 'if you do not look out for yourself, nobody else will.' When people can no longer identify themselves with family, community, or employment, and when presumed relationships with God are commonly discredited by a generally humanistic society, money then becomes for most the only way they know of defining who they are by what they have. Thus, we live in a society wherein many people seem unable to feel good unless they have an abundance of material possessions.

Humanism Is Materialistic

Modern humanism is materialistic in both the strict and in the practical sense of the term. In the strict sense, because humanism holds that matter is all there is, it explicitly denies the spiritual nature of man.

"Holding an organic view of life, humanists find that the traditional dualist of mind and body must be rejected,"⁵ "Modern science discredits such historic concepts as the 'ghost in the machine' and the 'separable soul.' Rather, science affirms that the human species

⁵*Humanist Manifesto II*, Third.

is an emergence from natural evolutionary forces. As far as we know, the total personality is a function of the biological organism transacting in a social and cultural context. There is no credible evidence that life survives the body.”⁶ “We have found no convincing evidence that there is a separable ‘soul’ or that it . . . survives death.”⁷

In a practical sense, humanism, being economically materialistic, implicitly denies the spiritual nature and needs of man. It relies solely on material possessions to satisfy the physical needs of life. In acquiring material goods to meet life’s needs, however, modern humanism relies not just on the individual but also on the state. In modern humanism, governing agencies of society are responsible to collect economic resources throughout society in order that there might be an “equitable distribution of the means of life.”⁸ Humanistic materialism therefore requires that civil governments be socialistic.

Influence of Materialism Upon Professed Christians

For humanists, who believe that there is no God and therefore that there is no life beyond present existence, such materialistic thinking is understandable. Christians, however, should not be overcome by such temporal thinking. It is a sad fact that professed Christians now generally seem to be caught up in the same materialistic quests, and to the same extent, as other Americans. Have Christians forgotten where they are going? Have Christians forgotten what they should be doing? Or have most Christians never really had much conscious awareness of these things?

Christians should have a strong sense of identity with God. Christians are children of God (Romans 8:14-17). Christians belong to God (Romans 14:7-8). Christians live with the protective care of God (Psalms 55:22). Christians are a part of God’s family on earth – the church (Ephesians 3:14-15). A Christian’s sense of security relates to his personal identity with God (Ephesians 1:3-10; Ephesians 2:4-9). Christians ought not rely on money for their security (1 Timothy 6:10, 17). It is too uncertain (Proverbs 23:5). Those who rely on money make it their god! (Colossians 3:5).

Christians should understand that this temporal life and material things are not all there is. Christians are but aliens and strangers passing through time on the way to an eternal home with God (1 Peter 2:11). Christians ought not therefore give themselves, like the ungodly, to materialistic quests, but strive for spiritual service (Mark 10:24). Christians should spend much time, effort, and money in doing good works that benefit others, and calling upon them also to obey and serve God (Matthew 25: 31-46; Ephesians 2:10). Christians must act on the premise of Jesus that “it is more blessed to give than receive” (Acts 20:35). Christians must assess their personal worth and success in life, not in terms of material possessions, but according to their standing with God, and their preparation for eternal life. To do otherwise is humanistic, foolish, and eternally destructive.

⁶*Humanist Manifesto II*, Second.

⁷*A Secular Humanist Declaration*, 6.

⁸*Humanist Manifesto I*, Fourteenth. See also *Humanist Manifesto II*, Tenth, Eleventh, and Fifteenth.

When professed Christians are materialistically minded, as most now seem to be, it is impossible for their homes to be genuinely Christian. Children imitate their parents. If Christians are going to build better Christian homes than now exists, then Christians must turn away from materialism. Children will come to feel secure in relying on God whenever they see that their parents are secure in their reliance upon God.

Conclusion:

Materialism is a major enemy of Christianity because it causes people to act like there is no God. It causes Christians to act like man has no spiritual nature. Materialism relies upon physical things to satisfy the needs of life. It is temporally oriented. It produces selfishness. It denies absolute morality. It makes a god of money. It has already captured the hearts of a vast number of professing Christians.