



John G. West, Jr.

—Symposium—

The Death of Materialism and the Renewal of Culture

*So God created man in his own image, in the
image of God created He him; male and
female created He them.—Genesis 1:27*

The proposition that human beings are created in the image of God is one of the bedrock principles on which Western civilization was built. Its influence can be detected in most, if not all, of the West's greatest achievements, including representative democracy, human rights, free enterprise, and progress in the arts and sciences.

Yet a little over a century ago this cardinal idea came under wholesale attack by intellectuals drawing on the discoveries of modern science. Debunking the traditional conceptions of both God and man, thinkers such as Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud portrayed human beings not as eternal and accountable beings, but as animals or machines who inhabited a universe ruled by chance and whose behavior and very thoughts were dictated by the unbending forces of biology, chemistry, and environment. This materialistic conception of reality eventually infected virtually every area of our culture, from politics and economics to literature and music. The cultural consequences of this triumph of materialism have been many, but the most damning include:

The Denial of Rationality. Materialists depicted our thoughts as the non-rational products of environment or heredity. Karl Marx proclaimed one of the most

powerful versions of this theory by claiming that all of our ideas about morality, politics, law, and religion are the by-products of our economic interests. Other materialists reduced human thought to chemistry or genetics. The materialists' assault on reason led to an incredible impoverishment of the study of human beings.

Social Darwinism. Charles Darwin, in his book *The Descent of Man*, lamented that the attempts of civilized societies to help the poor and handicapped would harm the human race by short-circuiting natural selection. Although Darwin went on to say that it would be immoral to do otherwise, he clearly laid the groundwork for applying the maxim of survival of the fittest to human society. Other people, of course, built on that groundwork, using it to justify even the worst excesses of the nineteenth-century factory system.

Coercive Utopianism. Although the belief that all thought and behavior are predetermined by material causes would seem

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to deny the power of human beings to reshape their world, materialism in fact inspired a virulent strain of coercive utopianism. Claiming either that they were merely the servants of the forces of materialism—or that they could overcome materialism by a sheer act of will—materialist reformers tried to create secular utopias in Russia and Germany. In America, meanwhile, significant parts of the cultural elite began to believe that we could engineer the perfect race through eugenics.

Moral Relativism. Materialists denied the existence of objective standards binding on all cultures, claiming that environment dictates our moral beliefs. Such relativism was uncritically adopted by much of the social sciences, and it still undergirds much of modern economics, political science, psychology, and sociology. The following statement from a college sociology text popular during the 1980s is typical: “We must recognize that judgments about good and bad, moral and immoral, depend very much on who is doing the judging; there is no universal standard to appeal to.”¹

Denial of Human Responsibility. By claiming that human thoughts and actions are dictated by our biology and environment, materialism undermined personal responsibility. The results can be seen in our criminal justice system, our civil justice system, and even our welfare system. In the criminal justice system, materialist criminologists such as Nathaniel Cantor argued during the 1930s that “Man is no more ‘responsible’ for becoming willful and committing a crime than the flower for becoming red and fragrant. In both instances the end products are predetermined by the nature of protoplasm and the chance of circumstances.”² Similarly,

in the civil justice system, people who injured themselves by misusing products began to claim that they were not responsible and routinely sued the products’ manufacturers. And in the welfare system, we abolished the traditional idea that there can be a moral component to poverty. In the modern materialist framework, everyone who was poor—no matter what their behavior happened to be—was viewed as entitled to government support because they all were victims of the blind forces of economics and society.

These fruits of the materialist culture are as poisonous as they are pervasive, and they deserve to be exposed and refuted. Nevertheless, critiquing the ill effects of materialism is not the primary purpose of the essays that follow. Rather, their purpose is to proclaim the astounding news that materialism is being vanquished, largely at the hands of modern science itself. Developments in biology, physics, and cognitive science have raised serious doubts about the most fundamental assumptions of materialist science. We face the ironic prospect that the very natural sciences which crowned materialism king may now help dethrone it.

The following essays explore the emerging collapse of materialism from a variety of perspectives and disciplines. In the first essay, author and Discovery Institute Senior Fellow George Gilder probes the roots of materialism, and then explores the dramatic revolution in physics and artificial intelligence that has undermined the standard materialist account of human life. Gilder contends that the downfall of materialism has the potential to lead to a cultural and social renaissance—a renaissance that can already be discerned in the thriving computer industry.

In the second essay, author and psychologist Paul C. Vitz examines the perverse im-

pact of materialism on twentieth-century psychology and describes how recent scientific developments are starting to undo some of the damage. Vitz shares his vision of a future psychology that is more humane, more meaningful, and ultimately, more hopeful than the materialistic psychology of the past.

The third essay, by philosopher and Discovery Institute Senior Fellow Stephen Meyer, looks at the standard materialist account of the biological world as a place ruled solely by chance and material forces. Meyer shows how new discoveries in the biological and chemical sciences are challenging this traditional Darwinian model, sparking a sharp controversy about the very nature of scientific inquiry. According to Meyer, modern science's attempt to reduce everything in biology to matter gets things backward. In reality, matter can only be fully understood when it is seen as an expression of a non-material mind.

Picking up where Meyer leaves off, Professor of Communication John Campbell shows how a defective view of rationality is perhaps the major obstacle to a full-blown debate over materialism today. Using as a case study the debate over the teaching of evolution in public schools, Campbell argues that science educators for too long have guaranteed the triumph of materialism in their disciplines by sharply (and unjustifiably) limiting the rules of engagement. In other words, materialistic explanations win by default because non-materialistic alternatives are never even allowed consideration. Ultimately, he argues, these artificial limits on scientific inquiry serve neither the goals of science nor the larger ends of

society.

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The death of materialism, when it is finally achieved, will be a great and momentous event, offering us the best opportunity for cultural renewal since the last century. But it will not revive our culture in and of itself. Old errors die hard, and many in the humanities and social sciences will likely cling to their materialist superstitions rather than face the shock of reinventing their disciplines. Even in those areas where an appreciation for mind and spirit are reborn easily, there is no guarantee that the rebirth will be healthy. Already we can see the attempt by some to replace materialism with a modern version of pantheism, which will be just as hostile to human dignity, rationality, and responsibility as materialism ever was. Thus, even while we anticipate the downfall of the last, great tyrant of the twentieth century, we cannot afford to be idle.

Notes

1. Ian Robertson, *Sociology* (New York: Worth, 1981), p. 68.
2. Nathaniel Cantor, *Crime: Criminals and Criminal Justice* (New York: Holt, 1932), pp. 265-266.