



## Book Review

*The High Price of Materialism* by Tim Kasser. Cambridge Mass./London, England: The MIT Press, 2002. Pp. xiii + 149.

Reviewed by Kofi Ankomah

Our earth is a rich planet. It is blessed with abundant resources, adequate to provide for basic requirements of everyone who inhabits it. Its resources can ensure high quality of life and good health for all. Food, clothing, and shelter can be made adequate for all, through judicious marshalling of the earth's resources, using everyone's capabilities and competences. Good nurturing will ensure indefinite and sustainable access to abundant resources for all. Unfortunately, greed, avarice and acquisitiveness have divided the earth into two worlds: the rich - with excessive affluence, extravagance and lavish living - and the poor - with poverty, scarcity, and below sustenance life styles. Though there are poor countries and rich countries, there are poor people in rich countries and rich people in poor countries who have similar hopes and aspirations that make mere classification by country alone inadequate. The affluent, in both the poor and rich countries, motivated by excessive materialism are plundering our planet. This point is acknowledged by Richard M. Ryan in his Foreword to *The High Price of Materialism* by Tim Kasser.

Kasser's book is audacious, stimulating and provocative. Its nine chapters are filled with well researched and scientifically sup-

ported conclusions that should provoke soul searching of all who want to live a sane and safe life in a healthy environment. A psychologist by profession, Kasser based his research findings on extensive empirical studies, both clinical and laboratory that he and his colleagues conducted, as well as others by other psychologists and social scientists, from countries spanning the globe. The population samples used included preschoolers, college students, and adults from all over the world. He agrees with humanist and existential thinkers such as Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow and Erich Fromm that people's well being has relatively very little to do with their possessions, beyond sufficient food, shelter and clothing necessary for their continued existence. Kasser debunks the myth that money and possessions will make people happy and argues that beyond the point of ensuring adequate food, shelter and clothing for survival, material possessions do not contribute significantly to the well being of human beings. He sets out to investigate what happens to people when their materialistic wants become predominant over other goals. He seeks to answer the questions among others: "What happens to our internal experience and interpersonal relationships when we adopt the

messages of consumer culture as personal beliefs? What happens to the quality of our lives when we value materialism? Kasser argues convincingly that scientific research worldwide on the value of materialism has concluded that people who focus predominantly on materialistic values have lower personal well-being and psychological health than those who place lesser emphasis on them. These findings covered samples of people ranging from many social classes, different age groups and indifferent locations in the world. In addition the studies used a variety of ways of measuring materialism. Kasser argues that emphasis on materialistic values tends to damage people's well-being, and results in low life satisfaction and unhappiness, depression and anxiety as well as a host of other problems including headaches, personality disorders, narcissism, and antisocial behavior.

Kasser argues persuasively that to have high quality life, people must have their needs satisfied. He identifies four needs that are necessary for human survival, growth, and optimal functioning. These are: 1) safety, security and sustenance - the human desire to remain alive and avoidance of early death; 2) competence, efficacy, and self esteem - the human desire to demonstrate inherent positive attributes in oneself that propels one to accomplish one's missions, goals and objectives; 3) connectedness - the human desire for intimacy and closeness with other humans - the desire for belonging; and 4) autonomy and authenticity - a desire for freedom to act on one's own and to have a feeling that one is self directed. According to Kasser, these needs must be satisfied for humans to have a high quality of life. When materialistic values become prominent, individuals will not have these needs well met. Emphasis on materialistic values will result in the inability to satisfy these needs, and this will contribute even more to people's misery.

Kasser aptly focuses on and cites many studies that conclude that people tend to resort to materialistic values and desires when needs

for security, safety, and sustenance are not fully satisfied. Whether we examine the characteristics of people's parents, family, or nation, or whether we look at the content of dreams or reactions to death, the evidence is the same. Certainly other sources of insecurity must exist that future research will document as leading to a strong value placed on materialistic aims. According to Kasser, some people experience situations that threaten their security and they adopt materialistic values as coping mechanisms. Unfortunately, emphasis on materialistic values is a poor coping strategy to alleviate security problems and satisfy such needs, according to Kasser.

Kasser grudgingly accepts that strong pursuit of materialistic ambitions may result in temporary improvement of mood, which may be short-lived and superficial and may result in emptiness of their material success. But he concludes that after a while, people begin to question their own competence and esteem, which will result in some ill health.

Kasser rightly highlights the impact of strong materialistic values on close interpersonal relationships and connection with others. He uses many studies to demonstrate that valuing materialistic pursuits conflicts with valuing many characteristics of high-quality relationships as well as betterment of one's community and world. People who invest heavily in materialistic values tend to treat others as objects and cannot bank on relationships and connectedness and are thus invariably faced with conflict and feeling of alienation. Intimacy and connection tend to elude them.

Kasser also scientifically investigates the impact of strong materialistic values on freedom and self-direction and shows that people who emphasize materialistic values invariably feel pressured, compelled and controlled rather than feeling free and autonomous. Such restrictions create emptiness and bondage.

Kasser demonstrates admirably that people who have strong materialistic values suffer and also have a negative impact on the

health and happiness of many others. He argues that when interactions with other people are based on materialistic values, empathy and intimacy are sacrificed and relationships become shallow and superficial. Such behavior has caused significant damage not only to the current generation but is likely to damage future generations. The repercussions extend from individuals to families to the broader community and tend to transcend even national borders. It is a pity that not much attention is paid to the damage to our planet, resulting from the strong emphasis on materialistic values by individuals and groups that have coalesced into brute force to objectify others. Kasser is right in apportioning the continuing decay of our planet to the blind pursuit of wealth and status by some individuals, groups of persons and some nations. As our earth's health suffers there is an urgent need to pull the brakes to stem the tide of hallucinating values that propel individuals and nations to consume a disproportionate and unsustainable share of the earth's resources.

Kasser suggests strategies for making changes in the personal, family, and societal processes that support materialistic values. He

offers alternative visions of values to make people happier by focusing on values that promote self-acceptance, good relationships and contributions to the community. He is convincing in arguing for a reduced emphasis on materialistic values as a method to heighten the well being of individuals, communities and the world at large. To improve the quality of life for ourselves, our families, our communities, and our planet there is no better sacrifice than to reduce the materialistic values in our daily lives and erase the picture of psychological health painted by commercials in the media worldwide. Since the 1970s, the advance of modern science and technology has made it possible to extend instant span of control across continents. Global concentration of economic power in the hands of persons with materialistic values, poses health hazards to our planet. *The High Price of Materialism* by Tim Kasser offers the appropriate vaccine against their spread.

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