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## THE SECULAR TRINITY, Part 2

In last month's essay, I made this observation: "For those souls driven relentlessly by worldly ambition, the secular trinity of wealth, fame, and power prevails." Let us now consider power and its relation to the spiritual life.

It is a commonplace that power corrupts. Although that may not always be the case, history offers numerous examples to support that point of view. The Irish statesman Edmund Burke noted, "The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse." Certainly the *potential* for harm and mischief parallels the degree to which power is vested in a person. Some have taken an even more cynical view. "Power is not a means, it is an end," said novelist George Orwell. In his *Leviathan*, English philosopher Thomas Hobbes states: "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death." History affords many instances of the corrosive effect of power on the moral fiber of those who wield it, not only in the secular realm, but in the religious realm as well.

In view of such warnings, what is the role of power in the spiritual life? Is it something to be shunned or feared? "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Or is the possession of power compatible with living a theosophical or spiritual life? "Desire power ardently" (*Light on the Path*).

By definition, *power* is what enables a person to act, to produce an effect, or to achieve a desired end. As such, power *per se* is neither good nor bad. Such judgments relate only to *how* that power is used, i.e., whether it is used selfishly or altruistically. Jesus and Buddha had great power—the power to influence millions of lives for the better. Joseph Stalin had great power, which he abused in his ruthless quest for political domination, thereby causing untold suffering and millions of deaths. George Orwell was right: for despots like Stalin, power is an end in itself. But for the great spiritual teachers of humanity, Orwell's view does not apply. For them, power is a means, not an end.

There is one other crucial difference: "Unlike spiritual values, wealth, fame, and power do not multiply when shared. They cannot be given away without reducing your own portion" (Huston Smith, *The World's Religions*). We will continue this discussion next month.

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