



Socialism **vs.** Religion

For many socialists, Marx is a prophet and communism is the gospel. Literally.

By Joshua Muravchik

The two central mysteries of socialism are these: How did an idea which, whenever put into practice, showed itself to be incongruent with human nature spread faster and further than any other political philosophy? And how did an idea that called on so many humane sentiments lend its name to the cruelest regimes in human history? The key to these riddles lies in socialism's role as a redemptive creed, a substitute religion—with a twist.

One of its most important founders was Moses Hess, the “father of German socialism” who played the major part in winning Marx and Engels to communism. After fleeing the cudgels of a benighted rabbinic teacher who tried to beat the Talmud into him, Hess had turned away from religion and immersed himself in the ideas of the Enlightenment. But his spirit was uneasy. He confided in his diary: “I worked without rest to rediscover my God, whom I had lost. . . . Nor could I remain a skeptic for the rest of my life. I had to have a God—and I did find him, after a long search, after a terrible fight—in my own heart.”

The God he found was communism. In a catechism composed in 1846, he contrasted his new faith with the one that prevailed in the society around him. Christians invest their hopes “in the image of . . . heavenly joy. . . . We, on the other hand, want this heaven on earth.”

Hess was renowned for his “purity of character” and “saintly”

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ways. But the circle he joined in pursuit of his God consisted of men of a different sort, foremost among them, Karl Marx. Although he was Marx's senior by several years, and led him in the embrace of communism, Hess soon deferred to the younger man's superior polemical gifts, calling Marx his “idol” who “will give the final blow to all medieval religion and politics.” Marx, however, was full of scorn for Hess's persistence in trying to ground socialism on an ethical basis rather than on historical inevitability. Hess, Marx wrote to Engels, was one of “those pieces of party excrement” that their chief socialist rival Ferdinand Lassalle “keeps on collecting for his manure factory.” And Engels wrote Marx gleefully about having seduced Hess's wife.

Hess's socialism was of a piece with other new ideas flooding out of German universities in the early 1800s. A generation of intellectually restless youth was aiming “to find in art or science the path to individual or national salvation which the orthodox Christian churches seemed no longer capable of providing for critical minds,” as Isaiah Berlin put it. Similar quests were pursued in England, Italy, and France—the nation that had done the most to create

the vacuum that the new systems were designed to fill.

France was the capital of the Enlightenment, an eighteenth-century intellectual movement spearheaded by writers relentlessly critical of the church and revealed religion. Their crusade was effective, especially among the ranks of the articulate and high-born. “Frank atheism was still comparatively rare, but among the enlightened scholars, writers, and gentlemen who set

the intellectual fashions of the later eighteenth century, frank Christianity was even rarer,” writes E. J. Hobsbawm.

During the French Revolution, the Christian calendar was temporarily replaced by one in which the days, months, and seasons were renamed for plants and animals and types of weather. The Cathedral of Notre Dame was renamed the Temple of Reason. Yet, Will and Ariel Durant note, “a thousand superstitions survived side by side with the rising enlightenment.” Madame de Pompadour, Louis XV’s mistress, had her portrait painted surrounded by scientific implements, but she frequented a fortune teller who read the future in coffee grounds.

The pursuit of a life liberated from the “superstition” of religion proved surprisingly difficult. Even Diderot, whose *Encyclopedia* was the flagship of the Enlightenment, confessed that he could not watch religious processions “without tears coming to my eyes.” Perhaps such unbidden feelings explain why, as most anthropologists agree, religion is universal. As scientist Edmund O. Wilson put it in his acceptance speech upon receiving the 1999 Humanist of the Year Award:

There is no doubt that spirituality and religious behavior of some kind are extremely powerful and, it appears, necessary parts of the human condition. . . . The inability of secular humanist thinkers to satisfy this instinct, even when evidence and reason are on their side, is surely part of the reason that there are only 5,300 members of the American Humanist Association and 16 million members of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Accordingly, the Enlightenment’s undercutting of Christianity left early nineteenth-century Europe hungering for a new faith. In Britain, church-like Halls of Science were erected by the followers of Robert Owen who held Sunday meetings where they sang from a socialist hymnal. But they were unable to fashion a coherent doctrine. Had socialism remained the work of such fanciful souls as these, it would have ended up as marginal as humanism, pacifism, vegetarianism, and so many other good-hearted but feckless theories.

Engels and Marx, however, succeeded in recasting socialism into a compelling prophecy, and their socialism absorbed or eclipsed all others. They shifted the argument from socialism’s rationality or desirability to its inevitability. This claim of inevitability was not an intellectual weapon but a religious one. It had no logical weight but great psychological power. Like the Bible, Marxism’s historical narrative was a tale of redemption that divided time into three epochs: a distant past of primitive contentment, a present of suffering and struggle, and a future of harmony and bliss. Nor was this the only way that socialism echoed

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revelation. It linked mankind’s salvation to a downtrodden class, combining the Old Testament’s notion of a chosen people with the New Testament’s prophecy that the meek shall inherit the earth.

By investing history with a purpose, socialism evoked passions that other political philosophies could not stir. As the American socialist intellectual Irving Howe put it:

Not many people became socialists because they were persuaded of the correctness of Marxist economics, or supposed the movement served their ‘class interests.’ They became socialists because they were moved to fervor by the call to brotherhood and sisterhood; because the world seemed aglow with the vision of a time in which humanity might live in justice and peace.

Most socialists would deny that their creed is religious in character. Did not Marx say that religion is an opiate? But many have given evidence of the religious quality of their belief. Michael Harrington, a fallen-away product of Jesuit education who became the preeminent American socialist of his generation, wrote: “I consider myself to be—in Max Weber’s phrase—‘religiously musical’ even though I do not believe in God. . . . I am. . . a ‘religious nature without religion,’ a pious man of deep faith, but not in the supernatural.” Harrington’s disciple, sociologist Norman Birnbaum, is even more blunt. “Socialism in all its forms was itself a religion of redemption,” he writes.

Despite the prophetic character of its claims, Marxism managed to establish the idea that it was somehow “scientific.” The term “science” had only fully come into vogue in the early 1800s, and science was discovering explanations every day for things that had long seemed inexplicable. By applying the terminology of science to human behavior, Marx and Engels developed a powerful cachet. Part of the power of Marxism was thus its ability to feed religious hungers while flattering followers that they were wiser than those who gave themselves over to unearthly faiths.

In addition, the rewards offered by socialism are more immediate than those of the Bible. For one thing, you do not have to die to enjoy them. As British Marxist Ernest Belfort Bax wrote, “socialism brings back religion from heaven to earth [it looks not] to another world but to. . . a higher social life. . . whose ultimate possibilities are beyond the power of language to express.”

The same ecstatic tone reverberated in Trotsky’s forecast that under socialism the average person would exhibit the talents of a Beethoven or Goethe, and in Harrington’s vision of “an

utterly new society in which some of the fundamental limitations of human existence have been transcended." In this paradise, "work will no longer be necessary.... The sentence decreed in the Garden of Eden will have been served."

The Biblical account of Adam and Eve's fall explains the hardship of life. It also portrays mankind's capacity for evil as well as good, suggesting that we might ameliorate the hardship by cultivating our better natures. But socialism makes things easier. Not only does it vow to deliver the goods in this world rather than the next, but it asks little in return. At the most, you have to support the revolution. At the least you do nothing, since "historical forces" will create socialism anyway.

In either case you do not have to worship or obey. You do not have to make painful sacrifices or give to charity. You do not have to confess or repent or encounter that tragic sense of life that is the lot of those who embrace a Biblical religion. No doubt, many or most people drawn to socialism feel some sense of humane idealism. But socialism's demands are all made on "society," not on individuals. It is idealism on the cheap.

If these are the things that made the religion of socialism so attractive, they also are what made it so destructive. What distinguished Biblical religion together with Eastern faiths such as Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism from other supernatural beliefs, historian Herbert Muller notes, is that its "primary concern was no longer the material success of the nation or the assurance of good crops, but the spiritual welfare of man... rescuing man from his long obsession with food and phallus." More specifically, the religion of these faiths connected man to a moral code. Then, two and a half millennia later, the religion of socialism sundered that connection. What was different about socialism was not the absence of God, since Buddhism and Confucianism also have no God, but rather the absence of good and evil or right and wrong. This opened the doors to the terrible deeds committed in the name of socialism.

To be sure, horrible offenses have also been committed in the name of traditional religions. One can cite the Crusades, the Inquisition, the World Trade Center destruction, and more. But in attacking people they deem wayward, religious zealots must ignore or suppress core elements of their creeds that address moral commands to the believer, constraining his actions. Socialism lacks any such internal code limiting the believer's conduct.

The socialist narrative turns history into a morality play without the morality. No wonder, then, that its balance sheet looks so bloody. In about three centuries the Crusades claimed 2 million lives; Pol Pot snuffed out roughly the same number in a mere three years. Regimes calling themselves socialist have murdered more

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than 100 million people since 1917. The toll of all crimes by observant Christians, Muslims, Jews, Buddhists, or Hindus pales in comparison.

Of course not all socialists committed or condoned violence, many were sincere humanitarians, especially those who called themselves democratic socialists. But democratic socialism has turned out to be a contradiction in terms. Wherever socialists have proceeded democratically, they have found themselves on a trajectory that takes them further and further from socialism, much like Britain's Tony Blair or Germany's Gerhard Schröder. That's why, long before Lenin, socialist thinkers like Plato, More, Campanella, and Edward Bellamy all foresaw the necessity of coercion.

The Blairs and Schröders of the world claim that they can do a better job than their conservative opponents when it comes to managing the capitalist economy and maintaining a social safety net. Perhaps they can. But this is a far cry from the enticing visions of a whole new life of brotherhood and effortless abundance that made socialism so uniquely seductive and so appallingly destructive.

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