

Were the First Christians Communists?

July 2023

Do Christianity and communism go hand in hand? Communism is about spreading wealth among people evenly, and Christianity teaches people to be generous. The Book of Acts states that the early believers “had all things in common” rather than anyone “say[ing] that any of the things he possessed was his own.” (Acts 4:32). So, does that make private property evil? Should Christians be communists?

Liberation theology answers “yes,” saying that the Gospel frees poor people from the oppression of wealthier people. Critical theory similarly claims that whichever group of people has more power, wealth, or prestige in society must have obtained those benefits unfairly. Therefore, the better-off group should surrender what they have in order that the groups of people who are worse off can catch up.

It turns out, however, that communism, liberation theology, and critical theory all have a common root, which is not only un-Christian but anti-Christian: the teachings of Karl Marx. According to Marx, all religions (and he especially listed Christianity) are nothing more than power tools of the elites. Marx was an atheist and a materialist. He said God does not exist, and the only thing that does exist is physical material. He said that rich and powerful people invented the idea of “God” in order to dupe poor and weak people into patiently living out their lower-class lives. According to Marx, Christianity preaches contentment in order to trick oppressed people into accepting a lower status in life.

Marx viewed all of human history as a conflict between rich and poor, between powerful and weak, and so on. Any form of “inequality” was necessarily bad. Marxists trace the origin of that evil to the ownership of private property. They figure: whatever one person owns, other people do not own—so that must be the source of inequality. With the problem defined in this way, Marx’s solution seemed obvious:

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abolish private property, have the state own everything, and then the state could spread the wealth around to everyone equally.

In order for this scheme to work, Marx also sought to abolish religion and the family. The first society to thoroughly follow through with Marx’s ideas was Russia, which abolished marriage, suppressed Christianity, and confiscated private property, reorganizing society into collectivized “soviets” that comprised the Soviet Union.

Within about 20 years of the Russian Revolution, 97% of all churches had been closed down and 90% of all clergy were either arrested or imprisoned. This near-eradication of Christianity took place in phases, with public worship initially being legal so long as Christians registered with local authorities. However, the architects of Soviet society had in mind from day one to completely replace Christianity with atheism. The church survived by going underground, just as the early Christians had met in catacombs during Roman persecution.

In China a similar pattern unfolded: compromising pastors worked with the Chinese Communist Party to establish “patriotic” churches, while faithful Christians faced imprisonment and torture, or else went into hiding in underground churches. In both Soviet and Chinese communism, the state itself became a church of atheism, and Christianity became not merely illegal, but treasonous.

To be fair, capitalism is not perfect either. The laws of supply and demand can be manipulated by the rich in greedy pursuit, leaving the poor to suffer. The church rightfully should be concerned about the abuses of capitalism, and Christians should show compassion to the downtrodden people whom they meet. This does not, however, mean that Christians should embrace communism—which in Marxist terms is not merely an economic model, but a worldview, animated by atheism.

While an atheist might at times recognize the reality of economic suffering, the Christian has a keener insight into the full depth of human suffering and also the correct solution. Christianity points to Christ, the very model of generosity who also willingly became oppressed in order to conquer the greatest of oppressors, Satan. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” (2 Corinthians 8:9)

Dr. Ryan C. MacPherson is director of the Center for Apologetics and Worldviews, and professor of history, philosophy, and legal studies at Bethany Lutheran College.

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