

PRINCIPLES

FROM CHRISTENDOM COLLEGE

The Godless Roots of Socialism



CATHERINE RUTH PAKALUK

WHAT IS IT ABOUT SOCIALISM?

It seems that the arguments against it, no matter how finely tuned, have to be made over and over again in every generation.

It pops up in one nation faster than it can be put down in another. The sons of men who fought against it frequently grow up to fight for it. In some places, it is the fashion of the youth and, in others, the fashion of the old. And although Pope Pius XI declared in May 1931, “Religious socialism, Christian socialism, are contradictory terms; no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist,” we continue to find arguments in favor of socialism, and even outright communism, published by Catholics. For instance, in July 2019, the Jesuit magazine *America* published a feature-length article titled, “The Catholic Case for Communism.” And just last year, in July of 2020, the executive editor of the *National Catholic Reporter* published a piece declaring that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the self-

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described socialist congresswoman from New York, is the “future of the Catholic Church.”

Just what is going on here? Hasn’t socialism been tried and found wanting? Hasn’t it been repudiated by the example of the world’s most notoriously evil regimes, including

Lenin and Stalin's Soviet Union (the USSR, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), Hitler's Third Reich ("Nazi" is an abbreviation for National Socialists), Mao's China and the present-day CCP (Chinese Communist Party, working for the socialist revolution), and many more horrific examples? Why doesn't this "specter," as Marx himself called it, go away for good?

In general, socialism refers to the set of philosophical, political, and economic theories that extol communal ownership of property and the confiscation of private property to be disposed of by the state. Communism (with a large "C" or a small "c") refers to those political ideologies that give to socialism a specific political form aligned with Marxist-Hegelian theories of class struggle. Therefore, all communists are socialists, though some socialists are not communists. In what follows, I will generally treat socialism and communism interchangeably, since socialism is the broader category to which all communism belongs. But I am on safe ground as a student of the social teaching of the Church. The popes have not carved out a special exception for forms of socialism that are not communist. Any form of socialism that is true to its philosophical roots is treated with the same extreme censure by the popes. In delineating the differences between communism and socialism, for instance, Pius XI wrote: "If Socialism, like all errors, contains some truth (which, moreover, the Supreme Pontiffs have never denied), it is based nevertheless on a theory of human society peculiar to itself and irreconcilable with true Christianity."

THE SPIRITUAL ROOT OF SOCIALISM: GODLESSNESS

In his 1983 Templeton Address, Alexander Solzhenitsyn maintained that "the principal trait of the entire twentieth century," and the cause of its many conflagrations, was that "Men have forgotten God." Although Solzhenitsyn's critique is well-known, less so is the fact that Pope Pius XI penned nearly the same words six decades earlier in his first encyclical letter, *Ubi Arcano Dei Consilio*: "Because men have forsaken God and Jesus Christ, they have sunk to the depths of evil."

Writing in 1922, after the horrors of the Great War (1914-1918), the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia (1917), and the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920), Pius asked whether we could not find a "more profound cause for the present-day conditions." He located the trouble precisely in the atheistic state and hostility to God—especially in the areas of family and education:

It was a quite general desire that both our laws and our governments should exist without recognizing God or Jesus Christ, on the theory that all authority comes from men, not from God. [...] Legislation was passed which did not recognize that either God or Jesus Christ had any rights over marriage, an erroneous view which debased matrimony to the level of a mere civil contract. [...] Added to all this God and Jesus Christ, as well as His doctrines, were banished from the school. As a sad but inevitable consequence, the school became not only secular and non-religious, but openly atheistic and anti-religious.

As we now know, the horrors that opened the twentieth century, despite Pius XI's lament, did not lead to repentance and conversion but to an increasing spirit of death. Over the next half-century, almost without pause, wars raged around the globe, and nations adopted, sometimes with great fanfare, deeply misguided policies from a moral and spiritual point of view: divorce, contraception, abortion, and euthanasia, in some instances even declaring these policies to represent fundamental rights "at the heart of liberty." That is why, when an exiled prisoner of conscience from communist Russia had the opportunity to make one great statement before the nations of the free West, he offered no words of celebration but rather a rebuke and a warning: "Men have forgotten God; that is why all this has happened."

Today, almost forty years after Solzhenitsyn's address and a century after Pius' admonition, an honest assessment of public and private life would give little ground for encouragement. The United States had long been regarded as an exception to the trend of secularity in the West, especially as compared to Europe. But the Christian share of the U.S. population declined 8 percentage points, from 78.4% to 70.6%, in the span of time that Obama was president. Eight percentage points in eight years! During the same interval, the percentage of U.S. adults describing themselves as religiously *unaffiliated*—atheist, agnostic, or "nothing in particular," the "nones"—increased more than 6 points, from 16.1% to 22.8%. Further, roughly a third of U.S. adults say that they "seldom" or "never"

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attend worship services, and only a little more than a third (37%) report attending services weekly. No one can seriously contend that the United States as a whole is becoming *more mindful* of God. If we define a social category of "separation from God" or "godlessness" that includes atheists, agnostics, the religiously unaffiliated, and all those who attend worship services only occasionally, then more than 60% of U.S. adults fall into this category. The principal crisis for many nations in the twentieth century has become so for the United States too in the twenty-first.

What has all this to do with socialism? To understand, we might turn again to Pius XI who reigned from 1922 to 1939. The last major encyclical of his Pontificate, *Divini Redemptoris* (1937, on Atheistic Communism), dealt with exactly this question. The Popes of the Leonine



Pope Pius XI

era sometimes used socialism and communism interchangeably, though communism specifically characterizes those movements based on Marxist theories of class struggle. The Pope singles out especially the practice of violent revolution, the overthrow of social order, the persecution and abolition of the Church, the usurpation of family life and economics by the state, and the establishment of tyrannical regimes hostile to what Pius called the *civitas humana*, or humane society.

The doctrine of modern Communism, which is often concealed under the most seductive trappings, is in substance based on the principles of dialectical and historical materialism previously advocated by Marx, of which the theoreticians of bolshevism claim to possess the only genuine interpretation. In such a doctrine, as is evident, there is no room for the idea of God [...] The Communists claim that the conflict which carries the world towards its final synthesis can be accelerated by man. Hence, they endeavor to sharpen the antagonisms which arise between the various classes of society. Thus, the class struggle

with its consequent violent hate and destruction takes on the aspects of a crusade for the progress of humanity. On the other hand, all other forces whatever, as long as they resist such systematic violence, must be annihilated as hostile to the human race.

Note how much today these words seem eerily prophetic, as we recall the year 2020, so full of tragic violence in our American cities, justified everywhere by the banner of progress. More striking still, Pius XI did not expect the evils of his day to be resolved.

Nor can it be said that these atrocities are a transitory phenomenon, the usual accompaniment of all great revolutions, the isolated excesses common to every war. No, they are the natural fruit of a system which lacks all inner restraint. [...] Tear the very idea of God from the hearts of men, and they are necessarily urged by their passions to the most atrocious barbarity. [Emphasis mine.] This, unfortunately, is what we now behold. For the first time in history, we are witnessing a struggle, cold-blooded in purpose and mapped out to the least detail, between man and “all that is called God” (c.f. 2 Thessalonians 4). Communism is by its nature anti-religious. It considers religion as “the opiate of the people” because the principles of religion which speak of a life beyond the grave dissuade the proletariat from the dream of a Soviet paradise which is of this world.

Referencing St. Paul’s second letter to the Thessalonians, Pius XI calls atheistic communism a competitor in this world to “all that is called

God.” So, the root inclination to socialism is godlessness, which rejects the principles of religion and seeks to establish paradise on earth. Yes, the Popes insist that socialism is predicated on philosophical mistakes about the nature of man, of property, and of economic life. Yes, good economists insist that socialism can be rejected on theoretical, empirical, and historical grounds. But the primary impulse of socialism is evil, rooted in sin: envy, greed, and dishonesty, just for starters.

One upshot of Pius’ position is that the temporal and the spiritual are far more intimately related than we commonly suppose. It is not possible to say that there is a realm of spiritual life that inhabits the heart and soul and that such a realm is divorced from, or lacks consequence, in the temporal order. Rather, there are direct and indirect effects of true Christianity in society—and the lack thereof—so beautifully expressed in the fragment of the letter to Diognetus in the second century A.D.: “What the soul is in the body, Christians are to the world.” It very much matters whether and how much we are connected to God—not merely for our own souls but also for the common good of humanity.

“Tear the very idea of God from the hearts of men,” Pius XI says, and “the most atrocious barbarity” will ensue. Not all barbarity is socialism, but all socialism—because it is godless—leads to barbarity. Little wonder that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez denounces our Catholic saints in public. Little wonder that David Bentley Hart, the Eastern

Orthodox theologian who wants us to “please relax about socialism” has also become a universalist, rejecting the Christian dogma of hell. Little wonder that our Christian republic in the twenty-first century, less mindful of God than ever, now suffers direct calls for socialism from candidates holding and running for the highest public offices in the land. And little wonder that we see manifested today many of the same marks of the communist regimes of the past and present: suppression of thought, of the Church, and of the family; usurpation of economic life by the state; and the general overthrow of social order.

I began by asking, what is up with socialism? Why does it resist being wholly discredited by its miserable failures? Why is it judged by its stated goals and not by actual performance? The reason for this, with the light of faith, is that socialism is a product of atheism, of being unattached from God and from Holy Mother Church. In short, it is an inclination arising from sin in the human heart, temptations playing “on the poor man’s envy of the rich.” There is a lot packed into that line. You do not have to be “poor” to fall prey. Any human difference can give rise to envy. Cain killed Abel out of envy. Sin rejects the differences that are part of human reality and part of the economy of salvation. Ultimately, sin rejects what God has offered and seeks to build the world in its own image, with its own past and its own future. Thus, *contra mundum*, the Church stands prepared to condemn not only socialism, but even the inclinations that give rise to it, as disordered.

ABOUT PRINCIPLES Animated by the joyful, lived experience of the faith, *Principles* draws on the fruits of an authentically Catholic liberal arts education to explore the ideas necessary to live a fully integrated Catholic life: one that upholds the value of human dignity, the role of virtue in private and public spheres, and the centrality of charity in both thought and action. We envision a Church—and a watching world—that embraces sound reason rooted in a robust faith.

RESPONDING TO SOCIALISM: THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

The Second Vatican Council rightly declared that atheism was “among the most serious problems of this age” and maintained that the remedy to atheism is the Church herself, “for it is the function of the Church, led by the Holy Spirit Who renews and purifies her ceaselessly, to make God the Father and His Incarnate Son present and in a sense visible.” In this light, since socialism is a byproduct of atheism, or separation from God, the answer to socialism is the Church herself. A spiritual problem needs a spiritual solution. But this bears some further explication. The example of John Paul the Great could not be more important for us today.

Commenting on Pope Leo’s teaching in *Rerum Novarum*, John Paul reminds us that the social magisterium is not an exercise in mere human prudence.

In Pope Leo XIII’s time such a concept of the Church’s right and duty was far from being commonly admitted. Indeed, a two-fold approach prevailed: one directed to this world and this life, to which faith ought to remain extraneous; the other directed towards a purely other-worldly salvation, which neither enlightens nor directs existence on earth. The Pope’s approach in

publishing Rerum Novarum gave the Church “citizenship status” as it were, amid the changing realities of public life, and this standing would be more fully confirmed later on.

Looking back to *Rerum Novarum*, we can find where Pope Leo stakes this claim. After rejecting the errors of the socialists, he offers “to show where the remedy [to the problem of the working classes] sought for must be found.”

We approach the subject with confidence, ... for no practical solution of this question will be found apart from the intervention of religion and of the Church. ... We affirm without hesitation that all the striving of men will be in vain if they leave out the Church. [Emphasis mine.] It is the Church that insists, on the authority of the Gospel, upon those teachings whereby the conflict can be brought to an end, or rendered, at least, far less bitter; the Church uses her efforts not only to enlighten the mind, but to direct by her precepts the life and conduct of each and all.

Thus, the special role of the Church in correcting calls for socialism is to bring to bear the Gospel in the world, the integration of the Church into the life of society. Leo pleads that “The striving of men will be in vain if they leave out the Church.” The social magisterium aims, therefore, to sanctify social realities and, if not to end bitterness,

to make it “far less bitter.” She does this principally through her mission to souls: grace! *The Church cannot be left out.* The life of grace transforms hearts, fosters virtue, and impels men and women to lives of heroism and sacrifice, accepting the burdens that cannot be avoided and seeking remedies through truth, freedom, and ingenuity for those burdens that bear improvement.

As a young student of economics in the late 1990s, I believed very much that getting it right about the facts of economic growth would lead swiftly to a reversal in the population-control policies that were by then already widely practiced. I believed that good science would lead in that direction and that we should have confidence that the findings of honest research would not contradict the laws of God. Today I still believe that. And in my research, I still aim to do “good science” to the

best of my abilities. But I have spent the better part of three decades observing, with great disgust, that the facts have not been enough, that powerful forces have systematically prevented “good science” from reaching scientific publications and from being cited and promoted. I have watched, in almost every subfield of my discipline, a distortion of the facts to meet the goals. These frustrations have led me to refine my youthful idealism about science. Neither economics, nor any other science, is a neutral or stable ground because it cannot evaluate its own assumptions. Science only becomes good when it cooperates with a complete picture of the “truth about God and man,” a picture that it cannot itself supply.

Economic disputes, like those within medicine, public health, and politics, always reflect deeper disputes about the meaning of human life and the mystery of reality. Thus, it is one thing to understand where socialism goes wrong—to see how it makes fatal errors. But to counter the full force and power of socialism, we need more than to unpack the mistakes. I offer these reflections, therefore, as an apostle for good economics, but as an apostle, I hope much more for the strength and splendor of the Church. Above all, we must be prepared to fight socialism with the spiritual weapons that are our birthright and the true envy of the enemy. **P**

Photo on cover: Girl sits in front of a wall picture that shows the communist leaders Marx and Lenin in Mozambique, Africa.

Referenced sources are listed in the article at getprinciples.com.

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Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, have mercy on us.
St. Joseph, Patron of the Universal Church, pray for us.



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