

MARX'S NEW RELIGION

ROBERT F. SCHWARZWALDER JR.*

Abstract: *Marxism has often been portrayed as a Christian heresy. Rather, this article proposes that Marxism is an entirely different faith, one containing theological, anthropological, and eschatological arguments. Its relevance is found in the appeal of elements of Marxist thought in current political trends. The failure of Marxism ever to attain its goals indicates the error of its concepts of man, last things, and God, as witnessed by the mass slaughter and dictatorial governments accompanying efforts to implement Marx's program.*

Key words: *Karl Marx, Marxism, alienation, salvation, man, nature, atheism, politics.*

Union with Christ is one of the NT's most profound teachings. To quote a 19th-century writer, "through our union with Christ, when we feel our total unworthiness and at the same time exult over our salvation, then only can we love God, who formerly appeared to us as an offended lord but is now a forgiving father and a benevolent teacher."¹

This lovely, if anodyne, statement was drafted by a German boy named Karl Marx. He wrote those words at the age of 17 as part of a high school essay. That he denied the truths they assert, militantly, only a year or two later is not only tragic with respect to his own spiritual life but more than tragic, in fact devastating, for the life of the world he helped create.

Although some would dismiss Marx, given the collapse of the Soviet regime and its Eastern European empire, he remains relevant. His materialist philosophy forms the basis for the current governments of China, North Korea, and Cuba, among others. And given that we are much informed these days about the promise of socialism, it is worth considering how socialism is grounded in a worldview articulated most carefully by Karl Marx.

According to Marxist scholar Peter Hudis, "Marx used many terms to refer to a post-capitalist society—positive humanism, socialism, Communism, realm of free individuality, free association of producers, etc. He used these terms completely interchangeably. The notion that 'socialism' and 'Communism' are distinct historical stages is alien to his work and only entered the lexicon of Marxism after his death."²

* Robert Schwarzwald is Senior Lecturer in the College of Arts and Sciences at Regent University, 1000 Regent University Drive, RH 324 H, Virginia Beach, VA 23464, and a candidate for the Ph.D. in history at the University of Aberdeen. He may be contacted at rschwarzwald@regent.edu.

¹ Karl Marx, "The Union of the Faithful with Christ," in *The Karl Marx Library*, vol. 5, *On Religion* (trans. Saul K. Padover; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 4.

² Peter Hudis, "Marx's Concept of Socialism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Marx* (ed. Matt Vidal, Tony Smith, Tomás Rotta, and Paul Prew; New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 757.

Today, most professing Western socialists disavow communism, the latter being too coated with the gore of its application in the last century. Yet their debt to Marx cannot be denied by anyone who looks seriously at the philosophical bases of the socialist program. Indeed, however benign socialism might appear initially, it presents a system whose collapse into outright communism is, if not inevitable, entirely logical.³

We are told that socialism will result in a better quality of life for the great majority of Americans. That it will foster greater economic equality and, thereby, more comprehensive racial harmony. And that it will penalize the greedy, grasping, heartless rich, the “one percent” who prey on the labor of the vast majority of Americans. This is alluring. It involves the weaponization of the term “justice”; a system that poses as a means to greater justice is one that finds a ready audience. Yet neither socialism nor Marxism cannot provide the results they promise. They have failed in implementation, consistently, wherever they have been applied.

Instead of liberty, they rely on coercion and repression. Instead of religious freedom, they deny its relevance and usurp the roles of God and church. This usurpation is enabled through indoctrination and aggressive and often violent action. Instead of political self-governance, they create rule by a self-selected elite. Instead of expanding prosperity, they lead to economic contraction. Instead of respect for human dignity, they demean it. And instead of honoring labor, they direct labor, both people’s occupations and their earnings. In doing so, they take from each person his most fundamental possession—himself and the work of his mind and hands. As John Locke, reflecting biblical teaching, wrote, “Every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has any right to but himself.”⁴

It is in this context that we will consider the appeal of Marxism as a religion. Calling Marxism a “Christian heresy,” as some commentators do, misstates the issue. Virtually all world religions offer accounts of cosmic origins, sin and evil, anthropology, soteriology, man’s final state, and so forth. Marx does the same. Thus, Marxism does not offer only an apostatized form of Christianity but a wholly new religious faith, one suggesting itself as revealed truth and therefore universally applicable.⁵

I. MARX’S BACKGROUND

To understand the religious claims of Marxism, one must start with the faith’s author. Karl Heinrich Marx was one of nine children born to a successful attorney

³ See Alejandro Chafuen, “Fighting Socialism in The United States Today,” *Forbes* (28 Feb 2019) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/alejandrochafuen/2019/02/28/fighting-socialism-in-the-united-states-today>.

⁴ Quoted from the section “Of Property” in Locke’s “The Second Treatise of Government.” John Locke, *Political Writings* (ed. David Wootton; London: Penguin, 1993), 274.

⁵ Cf. Roland N. Stromberg, “Marxism and Religion,” *Studies in Soviet Thought* 19 (1979), 209–17. Marx created “a religion or a substitute religion, marked by all the essential features of a faith. Such at least has been the verdict of too many witnesses to be dismissed” (210).

in Prussia in 1818. His father had converted to Christianity so as to be able to practice law but was descended from a long line of rabbis.⁶

Marx's father was a man of the Enlightenment who believed in a supreme being but whose more relevant gods were Frederick the Great and the Prussian State. He introduced his son to Voltaire and Rousseau and believed deeply that reason and science were the sufficient guides to life. Marx's mother was, apparently, religious only in a formalized sense.⁷ So, Karl's relationship with Christian faith was substantially the formal religious training he received in the Prussian school system.

Thus, he attended university without any kind of personal faith. And at university he lost even his pro-forma religious allegiance (first at the University of Bonn, and then at the University of Berlin). It was at Berlin that he joined an organization known as the "Young Hegelians." In his subsequent Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Jena, Marx writes approvingly of the motto of the Titan Prometheus:

Prometheus' admission, "In truth, I hate all gods," is [philosophy's] own admission, its own motto against all gods, heavenly and earthly, who do not acknowledge the consciousness of man as the supreme divinity. There must be no god on a level with it. . . . [Prometheus says:] "I shall never exchange my fetters for slavish servility. 'Tis better to be chained to the rock than bound to the service of Zeus." Prometheus is the noblest of saints and martyrs in the calendar of philosophy.⁸

Why was Prometheus so appealing to Marx? Because he led other Titans in an effort to dethrone the gods of Olympus. Marx, as a faithful disciple of Prometheus, spent his life seeking to dethrone the God of the Bible specifically and all gods in general.

Eventually, Marx married a Prussian noblewoman, Jenny von Westphalen. They had seven children, only three of whom lived into adulthood; two of these committed suicide.⁹ He was frequently on the run or in hiding and borrowed large

⁶ For helpful summaries of Marx's personal life, including his family history, see Richard Machalak, "A Swarthy Fellow from Trier," *Social Science Quarterly* 64 (1983): 777–85; and Lewis S. Feuer and David T. McLellan, "Karl Marx: German Philosopher," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Karl-Marx>.

⁷ N. Lobkowicz, "Karl Marx's Attitude toward Religion," *Review of Politics* 26 (1964): 329–30.

⁸ Hal Draper, "Marx, Engels, and Self-emancipation," *International Socialist Review* 52 (May-June 2007), <https://isreview.org/issues/53/emancipation.shtml>. Of note is that Marx was heavily influenced by Bruno Bauer, who proposed "that the Christian Gospels were a record not of history but of human fantasies arising from emotional needs and that Jesus had not been a historical person. Marx enrolled in a course of lectures given by Bauer on the prophet Isaiah. Bauer taught that a new social catastrophe "more tremendous" than that of the advent of Christianity was in the making." Feuer and McLellan, "Karl Marx."

⁹ "The sad irony was that as much as he loved his family, he did not seem to consider that they, too, needed saving. Like an artist single-mindedly dedicated to his vision, Marx expected his wife and children to fall into place behind him because they also recognized the significance of his work. He believed that they, too, must be ready to sacrifice for his goals. Lovingly and without hesitation, they did." Mary Gabriel, "Love and Capital: Karl Marx's Marriage Was Decidedly Not Marxian," *The Daily Beast* (Sep-

sums of money from his friend and acolyte, the British industrialist and communist Friederich Engels. Marx died in London in 1883.

Marx's writings were copious. He began his career editing what became the largest-circulation newspaper in Prussia. Forced to flee for his radicalism, he eventually partnered with Engels to draft *The Communist Manifesto*. Much later, Marx's multi-volume *Das Kapital* provided political and intellectual standing to the then-nascent European communist movement.

II. MARXISM AS A NEW RELIGION

The Boston College philosopher Peter Kreeft wrote, "Marxism retains all the major structural and emotional factors of biblical religion in a secularized form. Marx, like Moses, is the prophet who leads the new Chosen People, the proletariat, out of the slavery of capitalism into the Promised Land of communism across the Red Sea of bloody worldwide revolution and through the wilderness of temporary, dedicated suffering for the party, the new priesthood."¹⁰

A somewhat simpler parallel is drawn by Ulster University economist Esmond Birnie: "The deep structure of Marxism parallels that of Christianity. It has a 'fall' event—the concentration of ownership of property in the hands of the capitalists—and a 'chosen people,' the proletarians—as well as a coming 'day of judgment,' when capitalism is replaced by the classless society."¹¹

Marx's displacement of Christianity with an entirely new and comprehensively conceived alternative faith was formulated and refined over decades. At its core was the rejection of all religious faith involving God. I use that last phrase deliberately, as Marxism is as much a religious faith as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam. It simply replaces monotheism with monostatism—the final and complete authority of the state as the embodiment of, if not of the will of the people, then of what those in power conceive as (or pretend to be) the people's best interests. This is used to justify the forced implementation of the Marxian political-economic agenda.

That Marx's project of Christian displacement was conscious was evident early on. "Marx himself insisted that an atheistic state predicted in his philosophy would be a perfect realization of the essence of Christianity," writes Pavel Hanes.¹² Yet this claim, made by Marx in 1844, was grounded in the belief that to achieve this "perfect realization," the faith it would replace must be eradicated.

tember 21, 2011), <https://www.thedailybeast.com/love-and-capital-karl-marxs-marriage-was-decidedly-not-marxian>.

¹⁰ Peter Kreeft, "The Pillars of Unbelief—Karl Marx," *National Catholic Register* (January–February 1988). The content of the original article is available at <http://www.integratedcatholiclife.org/2012/03/kreeft-the-pillars-of-unbelief-marx/>.

¹¹ Esmond Birnie, "What's the Christian view on Marx?" *Irish News* (July 27, 2017). This theme was perhaps first used by Bertrand Russell, *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 2008), 363. Arnold Toynbee pursued the same theme. See Christopher Berwin, "Research in a Global Context: A Discussion of Toynbee's Legacy," *Review of International Studies* 18.2 (April 1992), 117–18.

¹² Pavel Hanes, "Introduction," in Lester DeKoster, *Communism and Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Christian's Library, 2018), xvi.

German philosopher Karl Löwith believed that “Marx’s historical materialism is a secularized version of Christian teleology,” writes Bryan S. Turner, who goes on to argue that Löwith “treats Marx’s philosophy of history as a global vision that depends fundamentally on the Christian scheme of eschatology, the doctrine of the Last Days and the Restoration of man to Grace.” Turner continues that “this interpretation of Marxism has often been challenged by Marxists who want to reject any association between Christianity and Marxism, but it is an association which is difficult to dispel.”¹³

The above-named commentators are augmented in their claims by the way Marx made the rejection of Christian faith so central to his principal arguments that it is difficult not to believe he did so out of a nagging sense of aggravation with that faith. This is why Marx made his views of organized theological religion clear early in his writing. In 1844, in his work on Hegel, Marx wrote, “The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”¹⁴

This thinking has been consistent throughout the history of communist thought and practice. “Religion is a sort of spiritual booze,” wrote V. I. Lenin twelve years before his arrival at Finland Station, “in which the slaves of capital drown their human image, their demand for a life more or less worthy of man.”¹⁵ This theme was the central undercurrent of Marx’s thought for the next nearly four decades. It was the foundation on which he built his cathedral of materialism, oppression, and rage.

There is much to be said here. For example, commentary on the influence of Ludwig Feuerbach and G. H. F. Hegel on Marx is extensive.¹⁶ Instead, this discussion will be limited to the religion of Marxism under three theological categories: God, human nature, and the eschaton.

¹³ Bryan S. Turner, “Introduction,” in Karl Löwith, *Max Weber and Karl Marx* (Routledge: London, 1993), 15.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 131. For an exceptional but difficult-to-obtain study of Marxism in light of Christian theology, see Klaus Bockmuehl, *The Challenge of Marxism: A Christian Response* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1980).

¹⁵ V. I. Lenin, “Socialism and Religion,” *V. I. Lenin: Collected Works*, vol. 10, November 1905–June 1906 (ed. Andrew Rothstein; Moscow: Progress, 1965), 83–84, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/cw/pdf/lenin-cw-vol-10.pdf>. Originally published in *Novaya Zhizn* 28 (3 Dec 1905), signed: N. Lenin. Interestingly, Lenin here says that while private religious faith is at least temporarily acceptable (“It would be stupid to think that, in a society based on the endless oppression and coarsening of the worker masses, religious prejudices could be dispelled by purely propaganda methods” [86]), religion will be dispelled as in the “political system, cleansed of medieval mildew, the proletariat will wage a broad and open struggle for the elimination of economic slavery, the true source of the religious humbugging of mankind” (87). Economic justice leads, in Lenin’s view, to the natural evaporation of theistic religious faith (although he does say, “Our propaganda necessarily includes the propaganda of atheism; the publication of the appropriate scientific literature ... must now form one of the fields of our Party work” [86]).

¹⁶ See, e.g., Esther Oluffa Pedersen, “Religion is the Opium of the People: An Investigation into the Intellectual Context of Marx’s Critique of Religion,” *History of Political Thought* 36 (2015): 354–87.

1. *Theology*. “Marx’s atheism is an essential premise of his whole theory,” writes Peter M. Schuller. “His life’s work rests upon it.” Or as Bockmuehl argues, “Marxism ... contains an intrinsic atheism.”¹⁷ However, unlike the rather indifferent professed atheism of our time, Marx’s was not passive. As Lobkowicz has observed, “Marx’s atheism is distinctly dogmatic, in the sense that Marx always denied decidedly and uncompromisingly the existence of divine being; and this denial is one of the major cornerstones of Marx’s outlook.”¹⁸

Marx’s faith was effectively destroyed during his university years. He never recovered it. He came to believe faith in God was unscientific and merely the result of man’s recognition of his own deficiencies. This recognition led to the fabrication of a divine being whose perfection man set a standard for us to emulate.

Marx’s solution was to so alter conditions on earth that man would no longer feel a need to project his dissatisfaction with himself onto a pure and benevolent deity. “Marxism rejects the theological affirmations of Christianity,” argues K. Mathew Kurian.

Marxist materialist philosophy negates the idealistic philosophical position that reality consists essentially of incorporeal essences or ideas. Marxism, as a philosophy of dialectical and historical materialism, rejects all religious systems, including Christianity, based on ideas of “divine providence” and “transcendental reality.” In this respect, it is clear that Marxism and Christianity cannot be reconciled with each other in terms of philosophy (or theology) or world outlook.¹⁹

Marx’s diagnosis is, if nothing else, provincial. It reflects his formally Christian upbringing, one in which a compassionate and personal God was worshipped. Yet the study of world religion is the study of many gods who are arbitrary and cruel, even ravenous in their appetite for such things as human sacrifice. They are not projections of desire but demons of hate.

So, that being said, with what did Marx seek to replace the Judeo-Christian God? Man!

“Marxism is nothing less than a program for creating a new humanity,” says Bockmuehl.²⁰ However, as is discussed in the following section, to be fully realized, the new man can only be found in the context of a new society, in the collective, embodied in the corpus of a wholly new humanity. “All emancipation is a reduction of the human world and relationships to man himself,” writes Marx in *On the Jewish Question*. “Only when the real, individual man re-absorbs in himself the abstract citizen, and as an individual human being has become a species-being in his everyday life, in his particular work, and in his particular situation, only when man has recognized and organized his ‘own powers’ as social powers, and, consequently,

¹⁷ Peter M. Schuller, “Karl Marx’s Atheism,” *Science & Society* 39 (1975): 331; Bockmuehl, *Challenge of Marxism*, 85.

¹⁸ Lobkowicz, “Karl Marx’s Attitude toward Religion,” 319.

¹⁹ K. Mathew Kurian, “Marxism and Christianity,” *Social Scientist* 2.8 (March 1974), 7.

²⁰ Bockmuehl, *Challenge of Marxism*, 17.

no longer separates social power from himself in the shape of political power, only then will human emancipation have been accomplished.”²¹

To be human, then, is to abolish individual desire or need and absorb oneself in the aggregate common good. “Marx is looking for people who have left their ego-dominated pasts behind and have put the interests of humanity before their own,” Bockmuehl concludes.²²

Thus, human value is determined by personal sacrifice and a recognition of one's individual unimportance. So, society should be composed, Marx believed, of those whom, when he wrote, he characterized as the proletariat. These were the vast numbers of underpaid and woebegone people who eked out their existences under the heel of powerful oppressors. As they began prospering commonly—no one rich, no one poor, all working in harness gladly and happily—people would begin to display the great moral qualities required in the Bible, yet without appealing to theistic superstition.

2. *Anthropology.* Marx's understanding of human nature presupposes that as an entirely material being, once his material needs are met, man's ontologically harmonious nature would emerge. In other words, with equality of economic outcomes and with enough to eat, decent clothing and housing, a healthy environment for one's children, and so forth, we are a naturally good race of beings. This belief initially was informed by Marx's reading of Rousseau.²³

Yet Marx, given his atheism, saw man as the finite product of time, chance, and matter, differentiated ultimately from other animals by his capacity for creativity and labor. Writing in *The German Ideology* in 1846, Marx asserts that “Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence.”²⁴

So, given economic sufficiency and political equality, man as an inherently good being will rule himself with wisdom and charity. Yet in fact, as history

²¹ “On *The Jewish Question*,” 1844, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question/>.

²² Bockmuehl, *Challenge of Marxism*, 129.

²³ See Nathan Rotenstreich, “Between Rousseau and Marx,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 9 (1949): 717–19. Rotenstreich intriguingly asserts that “Rousseau's voluntarism becomes ‘practicism’—the activity ceases to be an occurrence resting on a psychological faculty and becomes an occurrence resting on an historical faculty. The will in Rousseau's theory creates the State, while the Praxis in Marx's view produces history and directs it.” Cf. Isaiah Berlin's careful argument that while Marx prized reason and science, he believed at least some of their assumptions must be challenged based on entrenched socio-economic influences shaping them: “Marx ... resolved to show that the conception of any given economic or social structure as a part of an unchangeable world order was an illusion brought about by man's alienation from the form of life natural to him—a typical mystification, the effect of purely human activities masquerading as laws of nature; it would be removed, unmasked, only by other, equally human activities—the application of demystifying reason and science. But this is not sufficient: such delusions are bound to persist so long as the relations of production—that is, the social and economic structure by which they are generated—are as they are; these can be altered only by the weapon of revolution.” *Karl Marx: Thoroughly Revised Fifth Edition* (ed. Henry Hardy; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 129.

²⁴ *The German Ideology* (New York: Prometheus, 1998), 37

demonstrates, the dictatorship of the proletariat almost instantly becomes the dictatorship of—dictators! Dictators whose only benevolence is seen in the number of people they choose *not* to execute.

As Gordon Haddon Clark observed, an inference of Marxian materialism is its abandonment of revealed or fixed ethics for those it claims to benefit. This means that to achieve communistic ends (ostensibly, that is), those in power could do what they wished with whom they wished. Marx asserts principles of right and justice but offers no ultimate basis for his claim, thereby giving his erstwhile disciples great latitude as they ground the cogs (i.e. people) under their charge. “In ethics Marx espouses a relativistic theory. Rights become class demands that are to be enforced rather than proved by rational argument. The claim of one class must give way to another; only force decides which; and success is the test of truth.”²⁵

Why is this? As Marx saw man as a wholly material being, it may be concluded that his emotions are responses to external events and physical needs. So, with his material needs met, man can be perfected.

Marx was a monist—man has no soul or spirit. His brain is merely an organ, sophisticated yet wholly physiological. The concept of mind or “inner being” is foolishness. The brain is capable of abstract thought, but man’s ideas, emotions, and desires spring from his biology and its responses to experience and observation.

If, then, man is merely matter—bone and flesh, molecule and microbe—he can be transformed through proper education, external constraints, regular meals, and a nice place to sleep. Like malleable putty, he can be refashioned from the outside in. Thus, Marx argued, what he called “the new socialist individual” would be a person of great virtue. As the late James Sire wrote, “People will supposedly be less individualistic and competitive, more apt to find fulfillment in working for the good of others. The ‘alienation’ of all previous societies will be overcome, and a new and higher form of human life will emerge.”²⁶

This all assumes that man is the most important being on earth, an assumption which is unstated, but consistent with biblical teaching (cf. Gen 1:26–27). However, his importance is not as a being made in his Creator’s image. Rather, man assumes the role of deity, with the state being the full expression of his anthropotheism.

To understand Marxist morality ... one must always come back to [the] atheistic refusal of the First Commandment, this repudiation of the reign of God, this positive act of faith in the divinity of man in terms of which ... human abasement is measured. “Coercive atheization” thus becomes mandatory. In order to

²⁵ Gordon Haddon Clark, *Religion, Reason and Revelation* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 73. As Clark notes, however, the self-evident irony is that “Marx seems to admit the fixed truth of materialism.”

²⁶ *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 90. For a helpful discussion of “alienation” in Marxist thought, see Kurian, “Marxism and Christianity,” 9–11.

build a kingdom of righteousness on earth it is necessary to root out from the mind of humanity the illusory hope of a kingdom of bliss in heaven.²⁷

This is both an accurate assessment and a far cry from Lenin's prediction that religious faith would die out naturally as workers gained economic ascendance and equality.

The failure of Lenin's prediction has been vividly, continuously, and bloodily demonstrated. Alfred B. Evans Jr. observes that contrary to Marx's belief that "fundamental economic and social restructuring would generate radical attitudinal change. ... Vladimir Lenin and Josef Stalin insisted that the political regime had to play an active role in the transformation of people's values, even in a socialist society."²⁸

So, as another scholar puts it, "The efforts to create the [so-called] New Soviet Man played a key role in the Soviet project. The 'totalitarian model' of Soviet society puts forward 'the cog in a wheel' as a central metaphor for the New Soviet Man. This metaphor embodies the notion of the passive individual subsumed under the collective and implies the machine-like operation of the Party and state apparatus controlling social life."²⁹

How did this work out in practice? Consider the story of Pavlik Morozov, who for decades was employed by the Soviet government as an example for children in the USSR to emulate. Why? "He was designated a hero for all Soviet children when he turned in his ... father to the authorities during Collectivization, putting loyalty to the Party above personal loyalties and natural affections."³⁰

The Marxian idea that man will, under the right political and economic arrangements, become a morally holy being is, of course, fatuous. This was witnessed in the Soviet effort to forcibly reshape man through the state's appropriation of private property, propagandistic education, and compulsory behaviors.

These primitive visions stand in bright contrast to Christian theology, in which man is a being made in the image and likeness of God, created with "eternity in his heart" and what Paul the apostle calls the "inner man," the soul and spirit.³¹ His biology does not constitute his ontology—his physical being is not all he is. He is a being with the capacity for relationship with his Creator and Redeemer.

Our imperfection is the result of sin—disobedience to God, not alienation from our true nature due to external repression, as Marx argues. Sin and its consequences separate us from God. In Marx, man's only separation is that which exists

²⁷ Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), quoted in Michal Valčo, "Communism as a Christian Heresy: A False (and Failed) Prophecy of an Ideology," in *Proceedings of the 26th SVU World Congress of the Czechoslovak Society of Arts and Sciences* (ed. Dalibor Mikuláš; Žilina, Slovakia: University of Žilina, [2013]), n.p.

²⁸ Alfred B. Evans Jr., "Soviet Man," <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/soviet-man>.

²⁹ Slava Gerovitch, *Soviet Space Mythologies: Public Images, Private Memories, and the Making of a Cultural Identity* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 49

³⁰ Jan Feldman, "New Thinking about the 'New Man': Developments in Soviet Moral Theory," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 38 (1989): 147.

³¹ Cf. Gen 1:26–28; Ecc 3:11; 2 Cor 4:16; Eph 3:16.

because of his inability to pursue his true desires due to the coercion and repression of powerful exploiters. Unless workers have complete control of the economy, including the means of production, they can never realize their full humanity.

Marx's vision of worker's collectives was unworkable because people disliked surrendering their property for the supposedly common good. Man is a finite being whose capacity for compassion and generosity is not unlimited. We are made for the intimacy and immediacy of family and friendship, and cannot love everyone equally. Marx's view of human nature was naïve to the point of being childlike, the equivalent of looking at the clouds and finding the shapes of dogs and birds.

The result, first in the Soviet Union and then everywhere else the virus of communism has spread, was the rapid development of highly centralized political control. Concentrations of political and economic power, particularly those without accountability and backed by force, lead invariably to sinful conduct on a massive scale. This is the clear pronouncement of history, from Stalin and the Bolsheviks to Kim Jong-Un and Xi Jinping.

Princeton's Stephen Kotkin has observed that "a century of communism in power—with holdouts even now in Cuba, North Korea and China—has made clear the human cost of a political program bent on overthrowing capitalism. Again and again, the effort to eliminate markets and private property has brought about the deaths of an astounding number of people. ... Communism's tools of destruction have included mass deportations, forced labor camps and police-state terror—a model established by Lenin and especially by his successor, Joseph Stalin."³²

Marx's reduction of man to a wholly material being with no value beyond his utility to the whole led to a fundamental disregard for the value of human life. Without a mooring in theism, humanity becomes the measure of all things. And as Carl F. H. Henry notes, "The atheistic philosophy of Marx was powerless to suppress the egoistic instincts of mankind; on the contrary, it unwittingly accommodated them."³³ It should be noted, however, that given the persistence of the communist project, any unwittingness has long since ended.

It is in this profound sense that Marxism is a gigantic stride backward in the history of human progress. In dismissing the idea of a personal Creator, Marx substituted an impersonal state, one led by sons of Adam. And as Paul writes to the church in Corinth, "in Adam all die."³⁴

3. *Eschatology*. Finally, then, what account does Marx give of the eschaton—to final things or, perhaps better, the final construction of the kingdom of God? It has

³² "Communism's Bloody Century," *Wall Street Journal* (November 3, 2017).

³³ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 5: *God Who Speaks and Shows* (Waco, TX: Word, 1979), 582.

³⁴ Kurian, "Marxism and Christianity," 11, succinctly and correctly observes, "The parallel between Marxism and messianic tradition, in terms of judgment of the existing society, hope and vision of a new world, the conviction in the viability of the alternative, and the ardent desire and motivation on the part of those who accept the new vision, are indeed interesting. But, it will be a folly to draw any further conclusions regarding alleged similarities between Marxism and Christianity on the basis of such general resemblance. The significant point of departure between Marxism and Christianity (and the prophetic messianic tradition) is the content of the two world views."

long been noted that Marx aims toward not only a new man but, as man is made new, a new end of history. "Marxism is not only a doctrine of historical and economic materialism ... it is also a doctrine of deliverance, of the messianic vocations of the proletariat, of the future perfect society," writes Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev.³⁵ Similarly, Murray Rothbard describes Marx as a "religious eschatologist":

In the same way as the return of the Messiah, in Christian theology, will put an end to history and establish a new heaven and a new earth, so the establishment of communism would put an end to human history ... for Marx and other schools of communists, mankind, led by a vanguard of secular saints, will establish a secularized Kingdom of Heaven on earth.³⁶

This vision mimicked the Christian belief in a "new heaven and new earth" that would spring from Christ's victorious return. "The Marxist concept of universal History was essentially inspired by the Judeo-Christian bracketing of historical time between the Fall of Adam and the Apocalypse," writes Igal Halfin. "Imbuing time with a historical teleology that gave meaning to events, Marxist eschatology described history as moral progression from the darkness of class society to the light of Communism."³⁷ Put more simply, Marx used a Christian framework to define human destiny or, as Halfin puts it, Marx used a Christian "plot structure."

Marx is concerned with realizing heaven now. Since there is no God, there can be no heaven. Since man is material, he must also be entirely a creature of time. Therefore, whatever one defines as the good life must be had now. As one commentator has written,

Communism supplanted the Garden of Eden with a Rousseauian primitive man at harmony with nature. ... Marx even incorporated a millenarian view of history as an evolving class struggle finally solved by the coming victory of the proletariat. Utopia represents Heaven, ultimately created on Earth—by man. The collectivist state becomes god.³⁸

Yet there is a major qualifier to this: In Marx's argument, the state can only be god because man is also god. Remember, deity is only conceived as a projection of man's longings and hopes, according to Marx.

If, then, man becomes what by nature he truly is, something he can realize by the reorganization of economic and political life, he realizes in himself those qualities he has assigned to an imaginary deity. And since we human "gods" are now

³⁵ Nicholas Berdyaev, *The Origin of Russian Communism* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan), 98.

³⁶ Murray Rothbard, "Karl Marx: Communist as Religious Eschatologist," *Review of Austrian Economics* 4 (1990): 123, 177.

³⁷ Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 40 (emphasis original).

³⁸ Bill Flax, "Do Marxism and Christianity Have Anything in Common?," *Forbes* (12 May 2011), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/billflax/2011/05/12/do-marxism-and-christianity-have-anything-in-common/>.

liberated to be our true selves, how, then, in our political systems, can we be anything but benign, generous, and wise?

In response, I turn to the late Chairman Mao and his henchmen in the heyday of Chinese communism. These fully-realized “new socialist individuals” conspired to destroy tens of millions of their fellow Chinese. From 1958–1962, it is estimated that 45 million people were beaten, worked, or starved to death. Some people were buried alive, others horribly tortured.³⁹

Mao’s response? “If we were to add up all the landlords, rich peasants, counter-revolutionaries, bad elements and rightists, their number would reach thirty million. ... Of our total population of six hundred million people, these thirty million are only one out of twenty. So what is there to be afraid of? ... We have so many people. We can afford to lose a few. What difference does it make?”⁴⁰

We should note that Mao’s slaughter was both more extensive than his numbers suggest and also really was quite catholic, transcending the narrow boundaries he listed. His victimization cut across incomes, regions, religions, ethnicities, and social stations. Never let it be said that a communist cannot also be an egalitarian.

Lev Bronstein, whose assumed name was Leon Trotsky, put it this way in the early years of the Russian revolution: “What pitiful nonsense are speeches about the peaceful conquest of power by the proletariat by means of democratic parliamentarism!”⁴¹ This is reminiscent of the scene in the recent “Superman” film in which Clark Kent finds himself knee deep in human skulls. In response to his reaction of horror, his brutal fellow Kryptonian tells him, “A foundation has to be built on something!”

The Black Book of Communism, published by Harvard University Press, catalogs in detail the bloody fruit of Marx’s ideological tree. According to the book’s editor, Stéphane Courtois, roughly 100 million people died under governments aligned with Marxist thought in the 20th century. Causes of death ranged from outright murders, mass executions, planned starvations, exile to so-called “labor camps,” and the Soviet Gulag system.⁴²

This began early. An early and more moderate Russian socialist, Julius Martov, writing in 1918, issued a chilling description of what was taking place:

The beast has licked hot human blood. ... The reign of terror established by the Bolsheviki since November, 1917, has filled the air of Russian fields with vapors of human blood. We witness the growth of the bitterness of the civil war, the

³⁹ Frank Dikötter, *Mao’s Great Famine: The History of China’s Most Devastating Catastrophe, 1958–1962* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), xii.

⁴⁰ Li Zhisui, *The Private Life of Chairman Mao* (trans. Tai Hung-Chao; New York: Random House, 1994), 217.

⁴¹ Leon Trotsky, *Dictatorship vs. Democracy (Terrorism and Communism): A Reply to Karl Kautsky by Leon Trotsky* (Workers Party Library 1; New York: Workers Party of America, 1922), 35.

⁴² Stéphane Courtois, “Introduction: The Crimes of Communism,” in Stéphane Courtois et al., *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (trans. Jonathan Murphy and Mark Kramer; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 4.

growing bestiality of men engaged in it. The great principles of true humanity that formed the basis of Socialist teachings have sunk into oblivion.⁴³

The true kingdom of God will be built not on massacre but majesty—the majesty of the Great King himself. It cannot be constructed, Babel-like, through human initiative, however exact and intentional any human effort might be. Any such tower not only will fall but will also crush those laboring to build it.

We can look forward to the final act of history when the already inaugurated kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ is realized fully throughout the universe. We can rejoice in the promise that when we see him, will be like him as he is, and that we will come to a kingdom of a God who will reign in truth, goodness, and beauty, a kingdom that will last forever and ever.

III. CONCLUSION

Any flirtation with, let alone endorsement of, communism is the triumph of stubborn insistence over the immeasurable weight of history. As the title of an article by economist Kristian Niemietz puts it, “Marx’s defenders should explain why his ideas never actually work.” Of course, they won’t.⁴⁴

Those who argue that Marxism, that communism, has never been tried as its theorists envisioned are lying to themselves and us. The brutality and oppression, the systemic and deliberate cruelty that have accompanied every single experiment in communist governance since 1917, are not unnatural additions to the Marxist program. They are the natural and unavoidable outgrowths of it.

This is why, as Martin Luther King Jr. said in a sermon in 1953, “Communism and Christianity are at the bottom incompatible. One cannot be a true Christian and a true Communist simultaneously. ... They represent diametrically opposed ways of looking at the world and transforming the world. We must try to understand Communism, but never can we accept it and be true Christians.”⁴⁵

King’s dictum has been exhaustively vindicated by the past and present witness of experience. Harvard student Laura M. Nicolae, whose family fled from communism in Romania, wrote this a couple of years ago:

⁴³ L. [Julius] Martov, “Down With Executions! (The Hypocrisy of Bolshevism),” in *Struggling Russia: A Weekly Magazine Devoted to Russian Problems*, vol. 2: Sept. 13th, 1919—March 20th, 1920 (New York: The Russian Information Bureau in U.S., 1920), 683, cited with slight variation in Stéphane Courtois, “Conclusion: Why?,” in *The Black Book of Communism*, 736. Historian Paul Kengor’s *The Politically Incorrect Guide to Communism: The Killingest Idea Ever* (Washington, DC: Regnery, 2017), is an excellent overview of communist thought and history. Although written for a popular audience, Kengor’s well-documented history of communism’s endemic brutality is as disturbing as it is compelling.

⁴⁴ Kristian Niemietz, “Marx’s Defenders Should Explain Why His Ideas Never Actually Work,” Foundation for Economic Education (4 May 2018), <https://fee.org/articles/marx-s-defenders-should-explain-why-his-ideas-never-actually-work>.

⁴⁵ “Communism’s Challenge to Christianity,” <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/communisms-challenge-christianity>. Cf. Mary-Barbara Zeldin, “The Religious Nature of Russian Marxism,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 8 (1969): 111: “the two sides (Christianity and Marxism) ... can reach a higher synthesis not by both being transcended, *aufgehoben*, but only if one of them is willing entirely to give up its essential nature and thus its very existence.”

Communism cannot be separated from oppression; in fact, it depends upon it. In the communist society, the collective is supreme. Personal autonomy is non-existent. Human beings are simply cogs in a machine tasked with producing utopia; they have no value of their own.⁴⁶

Thankfully, we serve a God whose valuation of those he has made in his own image led him to send his Son to take the penalty for our sins as he hung on a cross. The God-man Jesus of Nazareth came gladly to save us and sent his Spirit to live within us. This is transformation. This is the beginning of a whole new humanity and a whole new world.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Laura M. Nicolae, "100 Years. 100 Million Lives. Think Twice," *Harvard Crimson* (20 Nov 2017), <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/11/20/nicolae-one-hundred-million>.

⁴⁷ A final note: Twenty-four-year-old Joseph Marx, who says he is Karl's great-great grandson, makes his living as a "free runner," someone who practices the "art of acrobatically jumping around urban environments." Joseph "says he flirted with his great-great-grandfather's socialist ideals, but ultimately decided that they did not work in practice." Rachel Burford, "Karl Marx's Great-Great Grandson Backflips for Money While Sleeping Rough on Kingston Streets," *Surrey Comet* (October 30, 2015), https://www.yourlocalguardian.co.uk/news/13924611.Karl_Marx_s_great_great_grandson_backflips_for_money_while_sleeping_rough_on_Kingston_s_streets. Smart kid, that Joseph.