

Socialist idealism

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I'm one of those people who, when I'm talking about politics, is largely pretending to know what I'm talking about. I mean in the ideological sense. On specific issues I usually have a clear opinion on what I believe should be done, or I confidently assert that I have no clear position. But I never felt interested in pursuing an academic study of political philosophy. Occasionally, when I allow myself to go on a Wikipedia binge, I might familiarise myself with various political figures or some of the main political ideologies, but my knowledge remains at the level of an introductory vocabulary, missing than the grammar, syntax and idioms that a robust understanding of politics would include. So when commentators describe Pope Francis as a communist, or the Dalai Lama refers to himself as a Marxist, I must admit I'm not entirely sure what that implies.



Earlier this year in India, the Dalai Lama taught a lecture about 'A Human Approach to World Peace', in which he addressed capitalism, discrimination and violence. Blaming capitalism for inequality, he described his socioeconomic philosophy to be Marxist. He stated this position previously on numerous occasions, although explaining that he is not a Leninist. What's the difference between Marxism and Leninism? I don't know. I vaguely understand that these socialist ideologies are godless (with which the Dalai Lama, as a Buddhist, would not have a problem) and that struggle is necessary for development. Does the Dalai Lama encourage revolution? As the leader of the Tibetan people, he is leading a struggle to liberate his compatriots from the invasive authority of the Chinese government, so this would appear consistent. I wonder, however, how the Dalai Lama would respond to Marx's critique of religion:

'Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. 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. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.'

On the one hand, I don't think the Dalai Lama would describe religion as an opiate or illusory. On the other hand, people can lean on their religious beliefs as a panacean crutch and I could imagine a Buddhist response that appeals for the abandonment of this false happiness in preference for the pursuit of real happiness that is not illusory. An understanding of suffering is pivotal in Buddhism, with Gautama Buddha's discovery of suffering as the beginning point of his spiritual journey.



The suffering of the people is something to which Pope Francis draws attention frequently. Despite his calls for greater social justice, he explained in this interview earlier this year that his passion for people's suffering lies not in communism but in the Christian Gospel. Does that mean Jesus was a socialist? Was Marx correct about everything except missing out God? I've heard a few Unificationists say that communism would work if it included God, that it would be the ideal society. The *Exposition of the Divine Principle* even says that 'God's plan is to develop a socialistic economy'.

Why, then, did the Unification Movement invest so much of its efforts throughout the second half of the twentieth century battling against Communism? Why was so much effort made to promote right-wing politicians? I know some contemporary Unificationists who are vitriolic against the UK's right wing parties, attacking them while praising the virtues of other parties lying on the left of the political spectrum. An interesting paradox.

The above quotation from the *Exposition of Divine Principle* shouldn't be read in isolation, however. The socialism it describes is 'with a form and content utterly different from the state socialism that communism actually established.' So the question is one of semantics: what is our definition of socialism? The Koreans I've spoken with talk about the collective life that is part of traditional Korean culture. 'Let's do it together' is the kind of attitude referred to. I don't know if this attitude persists today, as Korea appears to become increasingly individualistic, although there is a terrifying sense of uniformity in Korea whereby everyone seems to follow fads and trends in zombie-like fashion. Perhaps in an agricultural rural context this collective living used to be the norm. It is worth aspiring to, however, and the contemporary challenge is how to foster such a collective mindset, that lives for the sake of the whole, while guaranteeing the rights and freedoms of individual people, families and businesses.



I struggle to comprehend social structures on scale larger than a family, but perhaps by understanding how a family works is a helpful way to understand this collective way of life. My family tries to exercise charity and hospitality to those in need. I'm inspired to hear about families who host guests without hesitation when those people are destitute or in need. Nevertheless, the charity is given from what we own, from our capacity to give. If I had more, I'd be able to give more. If I don't have, I can't give. By creating my own private economic foundation I can then look after the community around me. This, of course, relies on me having the attitude to serve the greater good, and an important criticism of capitalism is the self-centred individualism of the minority of people who own most of the wealth. However it is refreshing to see people like Bill Gates donating their wealth philanthropically; he is even encouraging other wealthy people to follow his example and pledge to donate most of their wealth for the sake of others. And since these rich people know how to manage money well so that they can make more of it, it's likely that they will be able to manage their financial resources well for the benefit of the world, rather than some incompetent but well-intentioned religious or political leader. If God gave me a billion pounds tomorrow, the first thing I'd do is ask someone else to help me manage it, because I know that's something I currently don't feel prepared to do!

If you understand political philosophy, I would welcome your constructively critical comments. I concede I don't really know what I'm talking about, but I feel strongly that God wants to be involved in our human (including political) affairs and the only way God's presence will be invited is when we unite by engaging with differing perspectives and understanding each other. A bird needs both a left wing and a right wing in order to fly; I hope that we can find a place for both wings in our political understanding so that politically we can begin to fly.

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