



How Christianity and socialism are at odds with each other

By Lawrence W. Reed, ISI Books, \$14.95, 135 pages

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Only several years ago, invoking socialism as a serious alternative to freedom was not entertained in polite society. With self-described “democratic” socialists now in Congress, and more socialists winning Democratic primaries in New York, we can expect new entreaties of religion to justify their philosophy.

I suspect that most of us have heard, in class, at a cocktail party or on the street, the opinion that Jesus “was the first socialist.” After all, he called for sharing and kindness, didn’t he?

A milder rhetorical question is: “What would Jesus do?” It’s sometimes applied by Christian-affiliated social service organizations and their advocates. Translated into a lobbying agenda, it can mean that, e.g., the advocates believe that \$10 billion in welfare or social spending is “necessary,” but that spending only \$8 billion represents “harsh, intolerable and un-Christian cuts” to a program. I’ve wondered if proposing to split the difference, at \$9 billion, would represent just a venial sin or a practical compromise for liberals invoking the Almighty and his apostles. Lawrence Reed, the president-emeritus of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE), has written a fun and eminently readable book, “Was Jesus a Socialist?”, to answer the question. Prior to FEE, he was CEO of Michigan’s free market Mackinac Center. Mr. Reed is a learned man, an economist and historian, steeped in the writings of the great classical writers and thinkers in history and theology. But this is a book geared to the popular audience, a worthwhile gift for your daughter, son, pastor and good friends.

With humor, direct quotation and clear exposition, Mr. Reed demonstrates how Christianity and socialism, far from being in sync, are ultimately at odds with each other.

Take “progressive” MSNBC host Lawrence O’Donnell, who claimed that Jesus would favor “taking everything” from the rich, and that he was “the first recorded advocate of a progressive income tax.” Amateur “theologian” Mikhail Gorbachev, presiding over the most brutal of failed socialist states, echoed Mr. O’Donnell’s canards.

Mr. Reed debunks Mr. O’Donnell’s interpretation: Jesus, in suggesting that a rich man sell his possessions, was surely testing a man’s faith, but he never urged using the power of the state to take from anyone. Jesus preached against envy and greed, and for keeping one’s priorities in order. Wealth per se is not immoral, but prioritizing material wealth over salvation is. “God loves a cheerful giver,” wrote St. Paul in Corinthians. Nowhere did he or Jesus preach that government should forcibly take a family’s earnings or possessions. Indeed, the crux of Mr.

Reed's case points to the unambiguous chasm between socialism and Judeo-Christian charity. Voluntary charitable giving and performing good works and acts of mercy are expected from those on the road to heaven and salvation. Converting Jesus' commands into action, St. Vincent de Paul organized the wealthy of 17th century Paris to share their bounty with the poor and to engage in charitable works. Never did the saint call for compelling the well-off to fork over their fortunes, nor did he call for confiscatory taxation.

An act or gesture that is compelled by another ascribes no morality or immorality to the actor. Hence, the forced taking and redistribution of wealth inherent in socialism cannot in any way be compared with voluntary giving and kindnesses.

Mr. Reed illustrates how a "fundamental truth applies: it all comes down to force."

"Under capitalism, two Girl Scouts show up at your door and ask, 'Would you like to buy some cookies?' You get to say yes or no.

Under socialism, two Girl Scouts show up at your door with a SWAT team behind them. They declare, 'You're going to eat these cookies, and you're going to pay for them, too.'" Mr. Reed cites a pastor and popular blogger who suggested last year that "Jesus was the first Social Justice Warrior." The author deftly concurs that Jesus called out oppression, racism and sexism. But Jesus did not lump people into neat groups of victims, as today's left does. He treated each person as an individual and commanded his followers to "love your neighbor as yourself."

The preachings of Jesus are all about love. Mr. Reed observes: "Love is about affection and respect; power is about control. Nineteenth-century British commentator William Hazlitt said it well: 'The love of liberty is the love of others; the love of power is the love of ourselves.'" In Jesus' Parable of the Workers, he acknowledges private property, the right of a vintner to offer disparate wages, the leverage of workers as the needs for more hands are needed for the harvest, and the capitalist maxims of supply and demand. If Jesus had held socialist sensibilities, his parable could never have been delivered.

Mr. Reed "challenges anyone to find a passage in Scripture in which Jesus called on any government – Roman, Jewish, or another – to tax somebody and give to others as a method of assisting the needy."

In this era when progressives harp on "inequality" and supposed ways to address it, Mr. Reed offers a watertight axiom, in economic terms: "Free people cannot be equal; and equal people cannot be free."

Jesus, while urging maximum voluntary assistance for the less fortunate, would surely agree.

Herbert W. Stupp was an NYC commissioner appointed by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani.

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