



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on March 21, 2023

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Was Jesus a Socialist?

Ever since Scottish reformer Robert Owen's early 19th-century utopian "socialist" community dissolved after only a few years, people have been trying to make the "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" model work. They're still trying and, of course, we're told that past failures occurred only because "true socialism" was never implemented. Interestingly, this explanation may amount to the "no true Scotsman" fallacy (an "appeal to purity" to dismiss evidence against an ideal). Whether or not Owen was a true socialist or a true Scotsman, however, we also hear the recurring assurance that we simply need to have the "right people" effecting socialism. But then, to sell the idea, you need in addition the right people marketing it. The solution?



[Wikipedia/Carl Bloch](#)

Recruit Jesus.

Yes, even many secularists believe the Christ can be the Savior — of socialism. Thus do we hear the claim "Jesus was a socialist!" with the implication, "Do you wanna be a heathen, you capitalist pig!"

Of course, this isn't the first time a movement has recruited He who, were He in your corner, could be the ultimate salesman. The Nazi regime in Germany more or less claimed Jesus as a National Socialist, with Hitler and his henchmen espousing "Positive Christianity," which held that Christ was a Nordic character persecuted by a Jewish establishment. Yet while Nazism is fully discredited, socialism soldiers on despite leaving in its wake a trail of dead economies and bodies, the latter in the tens of millions. In fact, one could be tempted to say that as with Jesus, but speaking metaphorically, socialism has risen from the grave — though, in reality, it was never fully buried. As the author of the book *Was Jesus a Socialist?*, Lawrence W. Reed, wrote in 2020:

Time has passed, and the rising generation has no memory of the Cold War or of the repeated failures of socialism. To many young Americans, socialism isn't a dirty word; it's an ideal.

In May 2016, a Gallup poll revealed that 55 percent of eighteen-to-twenty-nine-year-olds had a positive image of socialism. In that year's presidential primaries, a self-described "democratic socialist," Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, earned more votes from voters under the age of thirty than the eventual Democratic and Republican nominees combined....

In 2018, the Democratic Socialists of America, which emerged back in 1982, saw members win election to Congress for the first time. One of the two ... elected that year was



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Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

In early 2019, a Harris poll showed that half of Americans aged eighteen to thirty-nine said they would “prefer living in a socialist country.” A 2019 report by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation revealed that more than 70 percent of millennials said they were likely to vote for a socialist for president.

Perhaps this isn’t surprising. It may sound silly at first blush, but branding is effective, and what’s in a name? People generally love socializing and the sociable, and they may even belong to social clubs. And *socialism* just sounds so — so innocuous, so helpful, so friendly. What’s not to like?

This linguistics-born image matters because it’s typically all young people have: Most of them can’t actually define socialism. Their elders often don’t help, either. For example, in a 2016 HuffPost piece boldly titled “Jesus Was a Socialist,” Occidental College professor of politics Peter Dreier writes that today’s “democratic socialists believe in private enterprise but think it should be subject to rules that guarantee businesses act responsibly.” Huh?

It’s true that Dreier is modifying “socialism” with “democratic,” which implies it’s something other than just “socialism.” But two points: First, government ownership of the means of production has long been a socialist tenet. Second, the professor’s title is not “Jesus Was a *Democratic* Socialist.” But if that actually is his point and an emerging far-left consensus today, well, then, that’s progress — it’s an admission that Jesus was *not* “a socialist” (per se).

When reality rained on Utopia: Despite the best of intentions, Scottish reformer Robert Owen couldn’t make his secular collectivist commune (conception of which is above) in Indiana work, as incentive was lacking and productivity waned. Thus would his town, instituted in 1825 and named New Harmony, come to typify a now-old story — on the macro and micro scales, “socialism” fails.



Of course, it’s not surprising that a group (leftists) that can’t explain what a woman is would have trouble defining what socialism is. (If you identify as a socialist, you are one?) Yet we can’t possibly decide if Jesus was a socialist without first defining what we’re actually talking about. And if Dreier’s definition is valid, well, then, we don’t have to argue about whether we should be socialist; we already are. For we have private enterprise, and we have rules (i.e., regulations) forcing businesses to act in ways deemed responsible. Dreier’s set may say there aren’t enough such rules, but then what we have



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is simply that old argument about the size and scope of government.

What's more, allowing for private enterprise means involving the profit motive and having degrees of business success varying with people's different ability levels, and this means there won't be "economic equality" but income-determined classes; this will also mean having losers and winners and big winners, the rich. Dreier's side may say they believe in wealth redistribution to mitigate this, more so than already exists. But then what we have is simply that old argument about types and levels of taxation.

In reality, what "democratic socialists" appear to want is the merger of corporate and government power — which is known as corporatism. It's also something else: fascism. As a founding father of that ideology, Benito Mussolini, put it, "Fascism should rightly be called corporatism, as it is the merger of corporate and government power." I bet good ol' Professor Dreier never thought of himself as an economic fascist.

A better definition of "socialism" was posited by the aforementioned Lawrence Reed in a 2019 Biola University interview. He said that "socialism should be defined as a system in which you have central planning of the economy by the government or government ownership of the means of production or the forcible redistribution of income by the government." The bottom line is that with all the definitions of socialism that abound, were it a mental disorder(?!), psychologists would long ago have, as is their wont, established a "socialism spectrum." Were it a religion, we'd perhaps be speaking of orthodox, conservative, and reform socialism.

This said, it would seem that an honest analysis would have to hold that socialism must involve government ownership of the means of production and the principle echoed by its most famous standard bearer, Karl Marx: "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs."

One man who may agree, at least during an honest moment, is Senator Raphael Warnock (D-Ga.). While preaching back in the days when he practiced politics only from the pulpit, in 2016, he declared to his Ebenezer Baptist Church flock that "evangelicals who stand on the Bible" but dismiss socialism should "go back and read the Bible." "The early church was a socialist church," he proclaimed, saying that the early Christians "took all of their things and they had all things in common.... It's a basic principle." Take that, Adam Smith!

As any pious believer knows, Warnock was drawing from Acts 4:32-35, which reads, "The community of believers was of one heart and mind, and no one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they had everything in common. With great power the apostles bore witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great favor was accorded them all. There was no needy person among them, for those who owned property or houses would sell them, bring the proceeds of the sale, and put them at the feet of the apostles, and they were distributed to each according to need." This does prove one thing, too: Warnock, assuming he's being sincere and not demonically clever, has but a comic-book understanding of both Christianity and socialism.

First, let's note that the early-church model has been replicated continually throughout history. From the advent of monasteries to this day, monks have lived communally in small groups. In the 19th-century United States, there were many small religious "utopian" communes such as the Shakers, Brook Farm, the Oneida colony, and the Latter-Day Saints. Then there's that smallest, most communal of all communes: the family.



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Following Warnock's logic, the family *could be called* socialist: In a normal family with a proper hierarchy, the parents are an autocratic (though not despotic) government; they make the decisions, and the children have no vote. The parents also could be likened to a "nanny state," providing everything for the kids, while the latter toil in only "state"-approved ways (e.g., chores, tasks on a farm). So you could label this socialism — except it's not. And you could, Warnock-style, imply that it's scalable and applicable to the wider society — except it isn't.

The first fundamental difference is that communes and the family are *voluntary* arrangements. The exception to this would be a family's children, yet this only buttresses the point; just think how disgruntled, restive, and even rebellious kids can become, sometimes bristling at their government's dictates. This is despite the fact that the family state and its little subjects typically enjoy an advantage big government and its subjects don't: strong emotional bonds and love helping to ensure they do right by each other.

Yet socialism, even if it's "democratic" and a majority of the citizenry votes for it, is compulsory. It's visited by government even on those who don't support it, and some of its policy impositions — many of which will have been unforeseen by even (or especially) most of those who did vote for it — will create millions of disgruntled, restive, and even rebellious "children."



The senior seducer: Wizeden but not wise, Senator Bernie Sanders represents so-called Democratic Socialism, a rebranding of an old mistake. In fact, in a new book he released he calls for "a political revolution in which working people come together," which is just a rephrasing of Marx's "Workers of the world, unite!" (AP Images)

Sadly Salable, but Not Scalable

This pressing of people into service against their will is just one reason why the family/commune model isn't scalable.

But to be socialism it *must* be.

By definition, socialism is a prescription for running a whole civilization; it's one-size-fits-all. Socialism would not be socialism had Marx and his fellow travelers merely said they encourage people to act communally, and they certainly knew communes existed. This wasn't enough for them. They demanded that their involuntary program be foisted on an entire society, via violent revolution if necessary. It was



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“Workers of the world, unite!”

Yet there’s something perhaps even more profound distinguishing the early church and Christian communes from socialism. It’s well known that religion is to socialism what a mongoose is to a cobra. And the spirit of Marx’s saying that religion “is the opium of the people” has been embraced by his co-ideologists in different times and places. Just consider, for example, what Grove City College political science professor Paul Kengor related in *Crisis Magazine* in 2021. “‘There is nothing more abominable than religion,’ declared Vladimir Lenin,” wrote Kengor. “He said that ‘all worship of a divinity is a necrophilia.’ He echoed Marx: ‘...Religion is a sort of spiritual booze.’ Lenin underscored socialism’s incompatibility with religion: ‘Everyone must be absolutely free to ... be an atheist, which every socialist is, as a rule.’”

Then there was William Z. Foster, who “was the first major public face, as well as chairman, of what became known as (and remains) the Communist Party USA, prior to which he had been with the Socialist Party of America,” informs Kengor. After first repeating Marx’s opium line during 1930 congressional testimony, Foster was then asked if atheism was a prerequisite for Communist Party membership. His reply was, in part, that “a worker who will join the Communist Party, who understands the elementary principles of the Communist Party, must necessarily be in the process of liquidating his religious beliefs and, if he still has any lingerings when he joins the party, he will soon get rid of them.”

Such sentiments from socialists/communists are legion. The bottom line, however, is that the faith they reject was and is absolutely integral to religious communal life. And perhaps the best way to illustrate the point is by returning to what I opened the essay with: Robert Owen’s utopian secular commune.

Owen’s endeavor might’ve been inspired by the aforementioned religious communes, some of which were quite successful and endured for more than 100 years. Yet Owen’s community, established in 1825 in New Harmony, Indiana, was already a conspicuous failure by 1827. What was the difference?

Neither the Owenites nor the religious communes had the profit motive, but the latter did have something else ensuring productivity: the God motive. It’s not just that “aside from practical purposes, doing manual labor is also considered a way of getting closer to God,” as the Lay Cistercians of South Florida’s website puts it. It’s that even more significantly (however you reckon the theology in question), believing you’ve been divinely enjoined to pursue your labors — or even, perhaps, that you’re earning your way into Heaven — is a pretty darn strong incentive.

The Owenites, however, lacking both the dollar and deity motives, had no incentive at all. Consequently, New Harmony’s “residents lacked the motivation to work,” wrote the McIver Institute in 2020. “The community couldn’t produce enough food to be self-sufficient, primarily because when its hardest-working members realized that they would earn the same benefits as the laziest, they stopped working.” Owen’s experiment, already listing in 1827, collapsed completely in 1829.

Of course, if even Owen’s small, 800-strong colony couldn’t make a secular collectivist model work, how could it be feasible on a national scale?

But the bottom line is that socialism and the early church are profoundly, starkly different.

All this said, it doesn’t directly address Jesus himself, but His followers. It is possible, too, of course, that they didn’t truly reflect His will. So, what of the Christ?

First, and obviously, any ideology explicitly advocating religion’s elimination cannot epitomize a man



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who, even from the secular perspective, was epitomized by religion. In fact, it takes Big Lie-level chutzpah for socialists to call Jesus one of their own after spending 150 years impugning what He represented, for an aggressively irreligious movement to claim a religious figure as standard bearer for benefit. Why, since they fancy faith an “abominable” illusion, they’d have to consider Jesus either a charlatan or a religious nut.

Of course, Professor Dreier and his democratic socialists would likely now say they accept people’s practice of religion, but it should be a “private” matter. (One could wonder, though, if perhaps ideology, socialism included, should be a private matter.) They would surely say that faith is fine as long as there’s a “separation of church and state,” a principle that, tellingly, isn’t in our Constitution but the 1936 Soviet constitution. A bit as with the early 20th-century Mensheviks, devout socialists would probably view the democratic socialists as heretical and, well, Joseph Stalin would have found, let’s say, very special accommodations for them.

This said, it is perhaps natural that socialists should overlook Jesus’ “religious” nature and consider Him as they now do: in only an economic dimension. For, as the late Pope Benedict XVI noted approximately 15 years ago, one of Marx’s great errors was viewing man as solely an economic being. But what of this? Did Christ say anything about economics that smacks of the red faith of the faithless?

Dreier makes this case. Insofar as providing evidence, though, he apparently could find only two Jesus quotations that he *believes* support his assertion. The first: “‘No one can serve two masters,’ the Lord says in Matthew 6:24,” Dreier relates. “Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” Most true — just as no one can serve God and government or God and ideology.

Of course, Dreier’s supposition is a straw-man argument: that supporting a healthy market economy is synonymous with “serving money.” Why, going tit for tat, one could just as easily dismiss democratic socialists by assuming they serve government (without even attempting to serve God). This is relevant because Jesus’ message was that you cannot serve *any* two masters; we’re not to put anything before God. Note here, too, that the context of Jesus’ statement was a sermon in which He instructed His followers not to worry about their bodies, food, drink, or clothes; in fact, Christ’s very next line was, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.” Should this be taken as an injunction against providing healthcare? And since socialists fixate on food, drink, clothes, and healthcare, claiming they can deliver necessities better than market economies can, should Jesus’ words here be considered anti-socialist?

Some might say so. Socialists use money as a medium of exchange just as their opponents do, so that’s a wash. Moreover, in the 2008 piece “Don’t listen to the liberals — Right-wingers really are nicer people, latest research shows,” author Peter Schweizer cited studies demonstrating that leftists covet money more than do conservatives; why, the latter even donate more to charity, considerably more when adjusted for income. So who, again, serves money?

Of course, Dreier might claim his assumption is based on an interpretation of the term “capitalism.” After all, since its root, “capital,” has as a synonym “money,” it could be conceptualized as “moneyism.” But this only proves that conservatives ever conserve leftists’ mistakes (and their machinations). That is, *vis à vis* political/economic systems, “capitalism” was first used *by* socialists — pejoratively.

Dreier’s second and last example is what Jesus said in Luke 12:15: “Watch out! Be on your guard



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against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Again, most true. Yet Jesus also warned against lust, such as in Matthew 5:28 and 1 John 2:16, the former of which reads, "But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart." Does this imply, however, that Christ was advocating a top-down, command-and-control, government-orchestrated system for monitoring, micromanaging, and redistributing the pleasures of the flesh?

Just as significantly, however, Dreier again fails to provide context, which, in this case, is deliciously ironic. For Jesus made His Luke 12:15 statement while rebuking a fellow who came to Him and said, "Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me." In other words, Christ issued His warning to a man asking for equal treatment and some wealth redistribution! Moreover, traditional Luke 12:15 interpretations present not the word "greed," but *covetousness*. Quite telling. It could bring to mind how Winston Churchill called socialism "the gospel of envy."

Christian socialist? Some socialists support their claim that Jesus is one of them by pointing to Christians, such as Pope Francis, who've criticized "capitalism." What they don't say is that socialism has been officially rejected by the Catholic Church. (AP Images)



So Dreier's argument for Jesus being a socialist is weak to the point of approaching nonexistence. In his article of 1,616 words, only the aforementioned 59 are from Jesus' mouth. Most of the remaining 1,557 are devoted to citing Christians who embraced socialism, seemed sympathetic to it, or claimed Jesus was — people such as Pope Francis, Francis Bellamy, Eugene Debs, Jane Addams, Reverend Walter Rauschenbusch, Helen Keller, and Norman Thomas. It's an argument, from a college professor, that's in the nature of, "I heard it on the internet." Yet one of the individuals cited particularly caught my eye.

Mentioning Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903) and his 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of Labor"), Dreier writes that the pontiff "focused attention on the dehumanizing conditions in which many workers labored. He affirmed workers' rights to just wages, rest, and fair treatment, to form unions, and to strike if necessary. He called on governments to promote a more equal distribution of resources and said, in particular, that the poor 'have a claim to special consideration.'" This attitude, in an age of child labor, is not surprising. Nonetheless, Dreier admits that the pope "did not espouse socialism." Yes, well, that's one way to put it.

Another is that Pope Leo devoted a few thousand words (literally) in *Rerum Novarum* to scoring



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socialism and dissecting its manifold flaws. Here is just one representative paragraph:

And in addition to injustice, it is only too evident what an upset and disturbance there would be in all classes, and to how intolerable and hateful a slavery citizens would be subjected. The door would be thrown open to envy, to mutual invective, and to discord; the sources of wealth themselves would run dry, for no one would have any interest in exerting his talents or his industry; and that ideal equality about which they entertain pleasant dreams would be in reality the levelling down of all to a like condition of misery and degradation. Hence, it is clear that the main tenet of socialism, community of goods, must be utterly rejected, since it only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit, is directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and would introduce confusion and disorder into the commonweal. The first and most fundamental principle, therefore, if one would undertake to alleviate the condition of the masses, must be the inviolability of private property.

Consider, too, that Leo's message was summed up by one of his successors, Pope Pius XI (1857-1939), 40 years later in the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*. "Religious socialism, Christian socialism, are contradictory terms," Pius unabashedly declared — "no one can be at the same time a good Catholic and a true socialist."

Returning to Jesus himself, there are two biblical stories involving the wealthy whose contrast speaks volumes. Matthew 19:16-30 tells of a rich young man who asked Jesus what he must do to enjoy eternal life. It was then established that the fellow already obeyed God's commands, at which point he asked the Lord what else was necessary. Jesus replied, "If you want to be perfect, then go and sell all that you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come and follow me!" The man walked away, crestfallen. Yet Jesus' treatment of Zacchaeus the tax collector in Luke 19:1-10 was very different. Zacchaeus was not only rich, but by his own admission had violated God's commands: He'd defrauded people. Despite this, when Zacchaeus vowed to give half his possessions to the poor and compensate anyone he'd cheated fourfold, Jesus approvingly announced that today, "salvation has come to this house."

So Jesus was asking the young man to become penniless while allowing Zacchaeus to retain half his fortune. Perhaps the Lord, knowing hearts and minds, realized the young fellow was too attached to his wealth and needed to detach; maybe He was calling the man to be a priest; or both. Regardless, this is far from socialism-prescribed "equality" and apparently reflects the truth that in society, different people should have different roles — and different bank rolls.

Yet what of Jesus' parable in Luke 16:19-31, some may ask, which involves a rich man who went to Hell while poor Lazarus, whom he'd ignored on Earth, went to Heaven? The belief that Christ was condemning wealth here and that those possessing it are barred from paradise is an old one; in fact, wrote Dr. William Oddie at *Crisis Magazine* in 1984, it's so old that Augustine of Hippo had to refute it in 414 A.D. After pointing out that "the poor" in the Bible often actually references the "humble and pious ... who know their need of God," Oddie quotes the church father as having written that

if the poor man's [Lazarus'] merit had been his poverty, not his goodness, he surely would not have been carried by angels into the bosom of Abraham who had been rich in this life. This is intended to show us that on the one hand it was not poverty itself that was divinely



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honored, nor, on the other, riches that were condemned, but that the godliness of the one and the ungodliness of the other had their own consequences, and, as the torment of fire was the lot of the ungodly rich man, so the bosom of the rich Abraham received the godly poor man. Although Abraham lived as a rich man, he held his riches ... lightly.

Speaking of merit, what about socialism's prescription for having the "state" provide for the poor? How meritorious is it? Late journalist P.J. O'Rourke had some idea. "There is no virtue in compulsory government charity, and there is no virtue in advocating it," he once wrote. "A politician who portrays himself as 'caring' and 'sensitive' because he wants to expand the government's charitable programs is merely saying that he's willing to try to do good with other people's money. Well, who isn't? And a voter who takes pride in supporting such programs is telling us that he'll do good with his own money — if a gun is held to his head." So even if you believe government aid is sometimes necessary, supporting it is nothing to brag about.

To sum up, though, none of this should need be said. Even left-wing *Current Affairs* magazine, while criticizing the aforementioned Lawrence Reed, his book *Was Jesus a Socialist?*, and rightists' alleged exaltation of wealth accumulation, admitted in 2020 that "Jesus was not a socialist." The magazine also takes pains to emphasize that Christ "wasn't a libertarian," either. No — and we should never label Him such.

As philosopher C.S. Lewis pointed out in *The Screwtape Letters* (1942), a book written from the perspective of a demon schooling an underling on how to corrupt a man's soul, humanity must be convinced to attach worldly labels to Jesus. People can call him the "first communist" or the "first liberal" or the first this or that — anything at all, so long as they don't think of Him first and foremost as being God.

Even those not believing in Jesus' divinity can appreciate that His mission transcended the worldly. He wasn't interested in redeeming mankind by altering us from the outside in but from the inside out, changing minds and morals, not money matters; feelings, not finances; hearts and holiness, not regulations and restrictions. He wasn't interested in reforming the way we govern others, but the way we govern ourselves; and He wanted God to be our highest power, not government.

Returning again to Matthew 6, when Jesus counseled, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth.... But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven," He was speaking of more than just monetary wealth. Where "your treasure is, there your heart will be also," Jesus elaborated. For our treasure can be anything, from pocketbook to power to politics to party to privilege and beyond. Just as some would kill for money, leaders have murdered millions in power's name. Greed is only one of many sins, and Christ's business is all of them.

As for you socialists, if you're so wedded to your ideology that you'll even claim Jesus would wear your banner, well, know this: When He was warning of misplaced treasures, he was talking to you.



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