

God and Socialism

What has God to do with socialism? Within contemporary political and theological discussion God and socialism do not mix. In fact socialism does not mix well in any of the usual forms of contemporary thought or language. Socialism in the popular imagination is assumed to be a political economic system which was discredited fully with the fall of the “communist” societies of Eastern Europe. And of course everyone including many self described socialists who should know better, “know” that socialism is only about either protecting the welfare state, or extending the power of government into the economic life of societies. Liberals and progressives believe that this extension of government is needed in order to meet human needs.

Conservatives believe that it is ultimately about the suppression of human autonomy and freedom. Since conservatism has been winning the propaganda warfare of the last forty years socialism has been relegated to outside the norms of “realistic” and “civilized” conversation. Thus one of the surest ways a potential political leader can be marginalized is to be tinged with the label of “socialist.”

Even those individuals who secretly in their heart of hearts believe that a little socialism might be a good thing will never admit it publicly due to fear of the consequences. Further more because everyone believes that socialism has no future in the real world it is considered an act of folly for any one, who wishes to be taken seriously, to suggest it as a real alternative for society. One may discuss socialism only in the smallest of private circles. However any attempt by individuals to discuss socialism outside of these circles is to risk being seen as naive, out of touch, or perhaps being even morally diseased in some way. So why talk about God and socialism?

God and socialism should be discussed because the moral character of God and God’s kingdom and justice can not be understood in the modern world without talking about socialism. The very nature of the justice teachings of the Bible as manifested in the Torah, the Prophets, and Jesus’ teachings on the kingdom of God can not be separated from the political ideals and values of socialism. I know how outrageous this sounds to most people. So by way of explanation I will begin by stating what socialism is not.

Socialism is not the equivalent to the failed communist systems of the old Soviet Union and of the other “communist” regimes of Eastern Europe. The fact is that communism's support of dictatorial, one party states, atheism, and the repression of political and religious freedoms is based on a perversion of the teachings of Karl Marx. The fact is that communist totalitarianism was no more socialist than the Crusades and the Inquisitions of the Middle Ages were authentically Christian. Socialist values in fact are the opposite of the values that have become associated with communism. In deed socialist parties such as the old Socialist Party of America and the Social Democratic Party of Germany have been some of the harshest critics and implacable enemies of communism. These parties which historically have seen socialism as being about the progressive fulfillment of human freedom have always recognized that communism has been the enemy of the freedom which they espouse.

So if socialism is not about communism and the worship of the state then what is it? While it is not possible in this article to discuss all of the concrete structures of a socialist society, a few points need to be made. Most modern democratic socialists believe that such socialist values as solidarity with the oppressed, economic equality, the protection of meaningful human community, democracy, freedom, and human justice will best be developed in societies in which businesses and the other economic institutions of society are democratically managed directly by workers and people in general. Socialism is about economic democracy and economic institutions that are governed democratically by worker owners. It is about the empowerment of people both individually and communally.

It is not about government ownership and control over society's economic life. In other words it is more in line with the biblical vision of economic justice and the liberation of the poor and oppressed.

But of course many people will shake their heads at what I have just said. According to the various forms of Protestant fundamentalism and many other forms of fundamentalist religion, the kingdom of God is all about the afterlife, heaven, hell and an other worldly salvation. Thus what relevance can socialism have to these concepts? The question of course is over the issue of biblical interpretation. Are the biblical concepts of justice (judgement), sin, salvation, etc all descriptive of exclusively supernatural realities or do they have a strong relationship with real human life as it is lived in this world and in human history. The evidence of both life and the Bible supports the latter view. That being true human activity plays a central role in the movement toward salvation and the kingdom of God. If this is true then the ideas of socialism are of great value in interpreting the meaning and direction of that kingdom.

What then is this value? Without the ideas of socialism the vision of kingdom of God or of "restoring the world (tikkun olam)" a central concept within Judaism becomes cramped within the confines of capitalist restriction. Socialist values such as democracy, liberty, and fraternity (community) were also values of the great French and American Revolutions and can thus not be viewed as being unique to socialism. However it has been the socialists who have used these values to radically critique the structure of the capitalist economic system. It has been socialism's contention that in the economic life of capitalism these values are in fact suppressed particularly in the economic life of work. Therefore socialists desire to create a political movement that will make human justice, equality, and democracy the real and not just the fictional basis of the economic life of societies and nations.

What socialism can do for religions such as Christianity, Judaism and Islam is to revivify symbols and ideas such as the kingdom of God, and judgement in ways that make of them real motivating ideals of life as opposed to being purely otherworldly banalities. The real God is a God of all of reality and not just of some otherworld reality only.

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