

Capitalism versus Communism as a Religion
Topic Number 3

The notions of “communism” and “capitalism” are often juxtaposed as two opposite political and economic systems. Since both can be defined in different ways, it is necessary to consider their different aspects, such as ideas, attitudes, political realities, and historical events. Twentieth-century social activists and writers in America portrayed communism as an existential threat that needed to be actively resisted, emphasizing that the Marxist ideology took the form of an anti-religion. The question arises if, applying their reasoning to analyze capitalism, the latter could also be considered a religion (or an anti-religion) in a similar sense. Although only the history of the twentieth century proved a radical difference in how the two systems affect people’s living conditions, the disparity originates from the sphere of ideas surrounding the two systems. Therefore, by discussing both the practical consequences and the ideological grounds, I am going to argue that capitalism fails to exhibit certain characteristics that make communism comparable to a religion, namely: holistic and exclusive doctrine, missionary nature, and intolerance of other religions with an attempt to replace them. The explanation of each of these aspects of communism will precede the discussion of their potential applicability with respect to capitalism. This will lead to the conclusion that communism’s key attributes make it similar to a religion but dissimilar to capitalism, which remains at most an ideology.

The arguments of William Graham (a popular Evangelist preacher), Carl F. Henry (an evangelical theologian), and John H. Hallowell (a political theorist), provide a valuable framework to analyze communism and capitalism as potential religions.¹ It is important to

¹ William Graham, “We Need Revival!” Sermon, Los Angeles, CA, 1949;
William Graham, “Satan’s Religion,” *American Mercury* (August, 1954): pp. 41-46;

note that while they assume that the economic alternative to communism is capitalism, the focal point of their writings is the tension between communism and Christianity. They assert that Marxism has a lot of parallels with Christianity, yet Marxism is a materialistic philosophy that rejects God and “personal man” in favor of “economic determinism.”² While this fact already suggests that capitalism has a different nature from communism, it is still worth establishing whether the same objections pointed against the latter hold when addressed toward the former.

In order to determine the relationships among the concepts discussed in this paper, it is crucial to first present the fundamental assumptions. One of them is that this paper discusses capitalism and communism in their historical context. Theoretically, it is possible to redefine communism and apply its definition to a democratic country with freedom of speech but with a centrally-planned economy, but this would not fall under the common definition of this term.³ In addition, capitalism is primarily associated with economic principles, rather than political or social ones; this fact guides a large part this essay’s argument.⁴ Another assumption is that presenting “faithful devotion to an acknowledged ultimate reality” is a

John H. Hallowell, “Communism and Christianity,” (New York, N.Y: Episcopal Church, The National Council, 1955)

Carl F. Henry “Christianity and the Economic Crisis.” (*Eternity*, June, 1955)

² William Graham, “Satan’s Religion,” 45; John H. Hallowell, “Communism and Christianity,” 11; Carl F. Henry “Christianity and the Economic Crisis,” 14

³ “The differences between communism and socialism are still debated, but generally English speakers used communism to refer to the political and economic ideologies that find their origin in Karl Marx’s theory of revolutionary socialism, which advocates a proletariat overthrow of capitalist structures within a society, societal and communal ownership and governance of the means of production, and the eventual establishment of a classless society.” *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “capitalism,” accessed December 09, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capitalism#note-1>

⁴ “*Capitalism* refers to an economic theory in which a society’s means of production are held by private individuals or organizations, not the government, and where prices, distribution of goods, and products are determined by a free market. It can be contrasted with the economic theories of communism, though the word *communism* is used of both political and economic theories.” *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. “capitalism,” accessed December 09, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/capitalism#note-1>

sufficient condition for being a religion, and therefore even an atheist philosophy could possibly be considered a religion.⁵

One reason why communism resembles religion is that it is a comprehensive ideology embracing the social, political, and economic orders; capitalism, in turn, remains generally limited to the sphere of economics. According to Hallowell, “[Communism] offers a complete explanation of life,” and, consequently, abolishes not only religion, but also such fundamental social units as a family or a nation.⁶ It promises the “redemption from evil in a new society” by creating a new socialist man with new ethics.⁷ In other words, communism is a materialistic answer for the evil in this world, which it attributes to class struggles.⁸ This way, communism steps in the areas traditionally associated with religions, and exclusively promotes Marxism as the dominant ideology.

Capitalism, however, leaves it to religions, decentralized movements, and independent thinkers to shape a society. In a free market there could possibly exist a multitude of competing ideas for social order, or there could be just one dominant trend; however, capitalism does not imply any specific religion or ideology. In American history, Christianity of different branches played the role of uniting citizens under a community with a common purpose and values. It was also the Christianity that addressed the problem of the evil in the world, promised redemption, and contained the prophecy of social progress.⁹ And even though laissez-faire principles sometimes influenced the opinions of religious writers, their

⁵ Merriam-Webster, s.v. “religious,” accessed December 09, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religious>

⁶ John H. Hallowell, “Communism and Christianity,” 2; Friedrich Engels, *The Principles of Communism*, (Edited by Jeffrey C. Isaac, New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2012): 67; Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*, (Edited by Jeffrey C. Isaac. New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2012): 88

⁷ John H. Hallowell, “Communism and Christianity,” 2; Graham 43

⁸ Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto*: 74; John H. Hallowell, “Communism and Christianity”: 9

⁹ The idea of social progress was characteristic of Puritan Christianity and its successors. Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Social Progress*. London, the UK: Heinemann, 1980: 126

ultimate point of reference was always the Christian God, and not capitalism itself. The largest extent to which capitalism influenced Americans in terms of ideas was its popularization of “the principle of self-interest properly understood.”¹⁰ However, this idea is, in fact, a mere justification (or “enlightenment”) of what people naturally do, and does not constitute a program for the renewal of the world.¹¹ Capitalism, therefore, does not offer a comprehensive doctrine that would cover most aspects of human life. Hence, unlike communism, it is far from being a religion.

Another aspect in which communism imitates religion is that it proselytizes for the promise of establishing a new world order; capitalism does not induce this kind of activity. According to Hallowell, by encouraging people to play “a creative role” in the “emancipation of mankind,” Marxism offered a “mission” for which many were willing to sacrifice themselves.¹² Communism needs devout faithful willing to convert and transform the entire society. The ultimate goal of an individual conversion to communism was a universal revolution, which, in practice, often led to the introduction of totalitarian regimes in many countries.¹³ On the other hand, capitalism is an ideal that does not require a community of fervent activists to defend it, and it has never had an equivalent social movement. Even though this could be partially attributed to the fact that capitalism was historically a status quo, and as such did not require a revolution, capitalism could also be perceived as correlated with freedom and democracy.¹⁴ Capitalism does not call to arms for a new social order; rather,

¹⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (1835, 1840; New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics Edition, August 29, 2006: 526

¹¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: 526

¹² John H. Hallowell, “Communism and Christianity,” 4-5

¹³ Friedrich Engels, *The Principles of Communism*. In: *The Communist Manifesto*. Edited by Jeffrey C. Isaac. New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2012: 64

¹⁴ Wolf, Martin. “Capitalism and democracy — the odd couple: We are making a bad job of reconciling the tensions to hold this marriage together” *Financial Times* (Online), September 19, 2017. Updated December 09, 2018. <https://www.ft.com/content/cec2664c-9a2e-11e7-b83c-9588e51488a0>. For example, the societies of the Central and Eastern-European countries that abandoned communism in 1990s did not specifically fight for capitalism, and yet a transition to the free-market economy was often a part of their democratization process.

even if perceived as an ideology, it is aimed at making the best use of the already existing conditions.

The opinion that communism has a missionary nature while capitalism does not is supported by the foundational texts of these doctrines. *The Communist Manifesto* demands “the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions” and calls the working men of all countries to unite with the purpose of “winning the world.”¹⁵ On the other hand, the purpose of *The Wealth of Nations*, the foundational text of capitalism, is merely to describe socioeconomic mechanisms discovered by the author. While the ideas included in the book may suggest certain policy solutions, they are far from being intended to convert anyone. Consequently, capitalism does not resemble a religion, as its sources are more academic rather than proclamatory.

There is yet another aspect in which communism imitates religion, whereas capitalism does not: communism does not tolerate other religions, whereas capitalism is associated with religious freedom. As Graham claims, “Communism is a religion that is inspired, directed, and motivated by the Devil himself who has declared war against Almighty God.” He even goes on to say that “Communism endeavors to crucify Christ upon a cross of secularism.”¹⁶ These somewhat rough statements can be perceived as a reaction to the bloody persecutions of religion in various places where communists carried out revolutions. However, destroying religion was more than a side-effect of these revolutions; it is already inscribed in the communist creed by Friedrich Engels in 1847, who calls communism “the stage of historical development which makes all existing religions superfluous and bring about their

¹⁵ Friedrich Engels, and Karl Marx. *The Communist Manifesto*. Edited by Jeffrey C. Isaac. New Haven, CT, and London, UK: Yale University Press, 2012: 102

¹⁶ William Graham, “We Need Revival!” Sermon, Los Angeles, CA, 1949; William Graham, “Satan’s Religion,”: 44

disappearance.”¹⁷ This implies the ambition that communism would replace the role religion plays in a society, and thus naturally become a new religion itself.

Capitalism, in turn, neither was meant to displace religion, nor led to such an outcome in practice. In Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations*, religion is not directly addressed, and thus it cannot be considered as a support or an obstacle for a free-market economy.¹⁸ In turn, the founders of American political economy, such as the clerics Francis Bowen and Francis Wayland, incorporated theology into their understanding of economy.¹⁹ They believed that free market was a part of God’s plan for the world, but did not preach capitalism as a new religion based on that belief. Capitalism was merely a new element added to the existing doctrine. In addition to these theoretical considerations, Alexis de Tocqueville’s observations provide a valuable insight as to what role religion plays in a capitalist society. He notes that “America is still the place where Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men’s souls,” and that religion should “be considered as the first of [the United States’] political institutions.”²⁰ Therefore, capitalism does not take the place of religion in a society.

Finally, it is important to admit that there are certain aspects of capitalism that may be used to argue that it is also a form of religion. For example, commercialism, which is almost inseparable from capitalism, forms habits that make it seem a cult of material things. Capitalism, in addition, may be considered responsible for peculiar religious movements such as the Gospel of Wealth, whose representatives, including Henry Ward Beecher and Russell Conwell, preached the obligation to make money as a religious duty. However, because of the decentralized character of a capitalist society, these individual examples are insufficient to be

¹⁷ Friedrich Engels, *The Principles of Communism*: 67

¹⁸ Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 1776 (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1976)

¹⁹ Francis Bowen, *The Principles of Political Economy*, 1856 (5th Edition. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Company, 1868);

Francis Wayland, *The Elements of Political Economy*, 1837 (Boston, MA: Gould and Lincoln, 1854).

²⁰ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: 291-292

an indicative of the general nature of capitalism. More importantly, they do not constitute the foundation of capitalism. There is, nonetheless, a potential threat to religion in capitalism. Since capitalism induces different individuals and groups to meet the popular demand, religion may be prone to change as a result of the change in public opinion, or it may lose the competition with the “innumerable temptation which fortune offers,” as Tocqueville notices.²¹ However, it would be a result of a somewhat natural process, as contrasted with the systemic threat posed by communism.

In conclusion, capitalism and communism are not only two opposing economic systems, but are also two totally different perspectives on the place of the economy in the life of an individual and of a society. Communism encompasses all spheres of life and makes them subordinate to one goal, which is the proletariat’s common ownership of all means of production. The communist revolution also entails the abolition of traditional family, nation, and religion—consequently, it overthrows the whole social order. Capitalism, in turn, is barely anything more than a principle whereby the state should avoid intervention in the national economy in order to let the free market allocate resources more efficiently. It does not imply any other solutions for the social or political order, although it may inspire certain ideologies promoting the pursuit of freedom and wealth. Therefore, capitalism fails to fulfill the same criteria that make communism a kind of religion.

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²¹ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*: 291

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Credits

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