

Is Socialism Christian?

Is socialism Christian? To many, the answer to this question may seem obvious. Yet among those to whom it seems obvious opposing answers are given. The purpose of this article is to examine what socialism is and then evaluate whether it can consistently be held with historic Christian orthodoxy.

Definition

The commonly accepted definition of socialism is the state ownership of the means of production. In a purely socialistic society, private property is abolished and all land, labor, and capital goods are owned by the state acting as the extension of the will of the people. This pure socialism was most thoroughly attempted in Russia from 1917-1921.¹ This Russian style socialism was Marxist in its means and ends. It attempted to bring about the communist utopia of a superabundant egalitarian society through revolution.

In many western countries including America, a more moderate form of socialism is being advocated under the name of democratic socialism. This socialism retains the ends of Russian style socialism but argues that those ends should be implemented by democratic action, by voting. This type of democratic socialism has two primary characteristics.² First, the democratic socialists at least give lip service to private property rights and do not attempt to socialize the means of production except in education, transportation, military, police, and law courts. Second, the owners of private property do not have the right to all the income that can be gained from the use of their property, and thus some of it is seen as belonging to society and taxed for redistributive ends.

Points of Sympathy

Before I offer my evaluation of socialism and whether it is compatible with biblical Christianity, I wish to sympathize with Christian socialists on two accounts. First, I sympathize with their attempt to create a distinctively Christian political and economic theory. Too often Christians view their faith as only relating to some part of their life, and not the whole of it – Christianity is relegated to what they do privately and on some weekends. This runs contrary to the biblical view of Christ which views Him as Lord over the entire created order which includes every sphere of human existence (Ephesians 1:20-23, Colossians 1:15-20, Hebrews 1:1-3). Abraham Kuyper was right when he said, “There is not one square inch in the whole domain of our human life over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry: ‘Mine!’”³

¹ Ritenour, Shawn. *Foundations of Economics: A Christian View*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2010, p. 493.

² Hoppe, Hans-Herman. *A Theory of Socialism and Capitalism*. Auburn: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2010, p. 61-62.

³ Kuyper, Abraham. "Sphere Sovereignty." *A public address delivered at the inauguration of the Free University*. October 20, 1880, p. 26.

Second, I empathize with their desire to take the biblical injunctions seriously, particularly the commands for justice (Psalm 72, Isaiah 3) and the example of the early church (Acts 2, 4-5). If indeed capitalism is an unjust system that oppresses the poor, it should be overthrown.

Evaluation

Now I turn to the evaluation of socialism and I think there are at least three areas where socialism conflicts with Christianity: private property, incentives, and total depravity.

Private Property

There is no ambiguity – true socialism undermines the right of private property. Whether in the form of Marx who said, “The theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property,”⁴ or in the form of modern democratic socialists who claim the government has the right to take the property of the citizen in order to redistribute it to someone else.

This is all directly counter to the teachings of the Bible which unambiguously affirm private property rights. The biblical view of property can be summed up and deduced from only one verse, four words in the English Standard Version and only two in Hebrew, Exodus 20:15, “You shall not steal.” Packed within this short prohibition is a holistic view of property and the relationships of individuals to their own property and that of others. A careful read of the Westminster Larger Catechism’s answers to questions 141-142 and the proof texts cited shows just how extensive the application of this commandment is.

Old Princeton theologian Charles Hodge, in commenting on the eighth commandment, defined the right of private property in an object “the right to its exclusive possession and use.”⁵ The eighth commandment, then, forbids any violation of the right of property of another. Any use, taking, or destruction of another’s property against his will or without his knowledge violates this commandment.

We must firmly insist that this right exists by the very nature of God’s creation. It is, so to speak, a “natural right,” by which I mean it is built into the very fabric of existence by God’s creative decree. It is not granted by the government upon the governed, it is not conferred by the common consent of society, it is not a cultural construction, it precedes them all. To quote Charles Hodge again, “Property...is not the creature of the law. No unjust law gives a title to property, valid in the sight of God.”⁶ The most powerful government in the world cannot justly legislate away the right of private property; would a majority of all the world be able to justly take away the property of but one man or woman against his or her consent?

⁴ Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." *Marxist.org*. 1848. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Manifesto.pdf> (accessed July 18, 2019), p. 20.

⁵ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. III. Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, p. 367.

⁶ Hodge, p. 369.

It would be difficult to overstate the importance of the right to private property; it is a necessary foundation for any society. Again, to quote Charles Hodge,

This doctrine of the divine right of property is the only security for the individual or for society. If it be made to rest on any other foundation, it is insecure and unstable. It is only by making property sacred, guarded by the fiery sword of divine justice, that it can be safe from the dangers to which it is everywhere and always exposed.⁷

And the most formidable danger to the security of private property does not come from individual thieves, but from those in power (especially political power) using their power to violate the property rights of the less powerful. Christian Ethicist J. Douma put it nicely, “Compared to the kings of the earth, all others are but petty thieves.”⁸ It is precisely because of the immense power concentrated in the government that it poses the greatest threat to private property, especially in an era where many individuals in the government seem to believe in no limit to its powers. As Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper said, “The rights of the citizens over their own purses must remain the invincible bulwark against the abuse of power on the part of the government.”⁹

Therefore, the biblical right to private property is absolutely opposed to the aims of both classical and democratic socialists who wish to either abolish private property or grant the government power it. Such a view cannot be reconciled with the Christian command, “You shall not steal,” which applies just as much to the government as it does to individuals.

Two objections to this view may be raised by the Christian socialist to this view: 1) The New Testament portrays the early church as a socialistic/communistic community, and 2) Capitalism forces people to sell their labor for less than its full value and thus the capitalist steals the excess value from the laborer.

Objection 1: The Early Church

Those who argue that the early church was essentially communist appeal primarily to three texts, Acts 2:44-45, Acts 4:32, 33-37, and Acts 5:1-11. From these passages, Christians have argued that the early church practiced a form of proto-communism which serves as a paradigm for the current socialistic policies of redistribution today. The first answer to this objection has three points: 1) Even granting the socialistic interpretation of these passages, they form no basis for classic or democratic socialism because they are merely descriptive of a practice in the early church, not prescriptive for society or even for the church catholic. 2) The practice of the early church was voluntary charitable giving, not state or church mandated collectivism. There was no form of coercive power used at all. 3) The early church in Jerusalem at most practiced the communal ownership of consumption, not the communal ownership of the means of production.

⁷ Hodge, p. 367.

⁸ Douma, J. *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life*. Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 1996, p. 290.

⁹ Kuyper, Abraham. *Lectures on Calvinism*. ReadaClassic.com, 2010, p. 72.

However, a fuller answer may be given by questioning the exegetical foundations of the socialistic interpretation and showing that these passages, far from undermining the right to private property, explicitly assume it. We can see this clearly in Acts 4-5. In 4:32, Luke writes, “No one said that any of *the things that belonged* to him was his own, but they had everything in common.” The italicized phrase makes it clear that far from undermining private ownership, the early church in Jerusalem actually assumed that there were things that actually belonged to individuals. However, moved by compassion for the needy, the early Christians there freely gave of their own possessions. This is made abundantly clear in verses 34-37 (note the italicized phrases):

There was not a needy person among them, *for as many as were owners of lands or houses* sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need. Thus Joseph, who was also called by the apostles Barnabas (which means son of encouragement), a Levite, a native of Cyprus, sold *a field that belonged to him* and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

This view is further substantiated by Peter's declaration to Ananias in Acts 5:3-4,

Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? *While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?* Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.

From these verses, I conclude that the early church in Jerusalem practiced a form of voluntary common ownership which acknowledged that the things owned by the church collectively were given freely by those who owned them privately beforehand.

Objection 2: Exploitation

A more nuanced and economically sophisticated argument that capitalism represents the exploitation of the wage-laborer for the benefit of the capitalist. This critique relies upon the labor theory of value common among classical economists (such as Adam Smith) which says that the value of a good is determined by the amount of labor it took to produce the good. Therefore, any excess profit from the selling of a good which goes to the capitalist or businessman who did not himself labor to produce that good, rightly belongs to the laborers and is stolen profit. Obviously, if an economic system were built upon exploitation, a Christian could not support it in good conscience and must advocate for an alternative system.

This critique hinges upon the labor theory of value, for if the value of a good is not determined by the labor that it took to produce it then excess profits benefiting the capitalist/businessman do not rightfully belong to the laborer and are not exploitation. And the labor theory of value does indeed fail, for at least three reasons.¹⁰

First, though the labor theory alleges to be an objective theory of the value of any good, common experience tells us that the economic value of a good is subjective. Take a new Tesla Model 3

¹⁰ Ritenour, p. 491-492.

and a new Honda Civic. The labor theory of value says that if the Honda Civic took more man-hours to make, it would be worth more than the Tesla Model 3. However, we know this would not be true. If the Honda Civic took the same number of man-hours to create, hardly anyone (dare I say no one?) would want to buy a Civic for the same price as a Tesla. The number of hours needed to create them does not make them equally valuable vehicles. Rather, the monetary value of the cars is rooted in the subjective preferences of the purchaser.

Second, the labor theory of value does not take into account the varying quality of the labor involved in producing a good. For example, a fountain pen which took me one hundred hours to create is not worth the same as a fountain pen made by a Namiki Maki-e craftsman. Furthermore, if the two people can produce the same quality good but one takes one twice as long, which unit of length determines the price of the good?

Third, the labor theory of value does not take into account the value of the original factors of production: land and labor. Since neither land nor labor is produced by labor, are they then valueless? Obviously not, yet the labor theory of value cannot account for the value of either one. Therefore, this critique of capitalism fails and the Christian is required to abandon capitalism on the grounds of inherent exploitation.

*Incentives*¹¹

The second problem with socialism is that of incentives. Under a purely socialistic economy, private property would be abolished and the economy would be directed by a centralized planning board, as in Russia in 1917-1921. The maxim, “from each according to his ability, to each according to his need” would be realized. The centralized planning board would determine the amount each family needed in order to live and would dispense it to them. This would destroy the incentive for productive activity and consequently thrust the country into abject poverty.

For example, let us consider two single women, Mary and Martha. Mary lives in a capitalist country where her income is determined by how much value others place in her labor or the goods she can produce. Say she is a skilled painter and is able to sell fifty paintings a year with fifteen thousand dollars profit on each painting. That means she makes seven hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year. On the other hand, Martha is an equally skilled painter and is able to produce fifty paintings a year. However, she lives in a socialist country and the central planning board has determined that she only needs thirty-five thousand dollars a year. Since her income is based upon her need and not the value she produces, what do you think that does to Martha’s incentive to create great paintings?

Or, take John, a welder for a large industrial company who fixes their machinery. He, being a clever man, has discovered that he will get paid no matter what his work performance is because his income is not tied to his productivity as in a capitalist economy. He then decides to slack off at work and take it easy, never pushing himself too hard. This results in a small reduction in the output of the company and thus a marginal increase in prices throughout the whole economy.

¹¹ In this section, I rely heavily upon Ritenour, p. 484-486.

The cost is spread among countless people, but the benefit is reaped exclusively by John, who alone gets to spend the leisure time which his slacking affords him.

Even under a democratic socialistic economy, the incentive problem remains. For example, take Jack and Jill. Both are skilled accountants, capable of doing fine work, and on paper their salaries are both seventy-five thousand dollars. Jack lives in a capitalist country where taxes are negligible (the income tax has not even been imposed) and gets to keep the full seventy-five thousand. Jill lives in a democratic socialistic economy under which there is a sixty percent income tax, she only gets to keep thirty thousand dollars from her yearly salary. Who has a greater incentive to work and be productive? This problem is only exacerbated by the presence of sin in the human heart, to which we now turn.

Total Depravity

This is an especially acute problem for the Christian socialist, for every Christian must reckon with the sinfulness of the human heart. The phrase “total depravity” does not mean that everyone always acts as bad as possible, but in his natural estate man is twisted and corrupted by sin in every aspect of his being. His intellect, will, emotions, desires, actions – they are all tainted by sin. A few Bible verses will suffice to show this (*italics added*):

Genesis 6:5 The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that *every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.*

Genesis 8:21 The LORD said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, for *the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth.*"

Jeremiah 17:9 The heart is *deceitful above all things, and desperately sick*; who can understand it?

Romans 3:10-12 As it is written: “*None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.*”

Ephesians 4:18 [The Gentiles] are *darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God* because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their *hardness of heart.*

Given this account of the sinfulness of natural man, is it wise to adopt an economic and political system which would centralize power in the hands of the ruling class over the rest of men? Would we be justified in trusting that those who get to determine how much another man may make (whether through a centralized planning board or an income tax) would use the money more wisely than that man himself? Is it wise to give sinful men the power to take the property of other men even if it is for “just” ends? Even setting aside whether there can be any just involuntary confiscation of property and whether the aims of the democratic socialist are indeed just, how long can we trust those with good intentions and aims to remain in charge of the system?

The conclusion seems obvious, the doctrine of total depravity leads one to the conclusion that men should not be given unrestricted power over other men because on the whole they will abuse it and use it for evil. There may be some exceptions, but in this case the exceptions prove the rule. Furthermore, we must note that Christianity is opposed to any sort of utopianism which tries to construct a perfect society this side of the eschaton. Regulation and education cannot effect regeneration, that is a work of the Holy Spirit alone.

The Christian position, which recognizes the utter sinfulness and depravity in man's heart, teaches us how unwise it is to give such men near-absolute power over other men. Power-hungry men with evil aims would soon rise to the top and turn the system to their own ends. However, in a free society, the way a man increases his own wealth and standard of living is by selling his labor or goods which other men value. Therefore, in order to maximize his own wellbeing, he must maximize his value to others to the best of his ability. In seeking his own wealth and wellbeing, he must serve others by producing things which they consider valuable.

Conclusion

Much more could be said about the relationship of socialism to Christianity and certainly much more could be said about the insurmountable economic problems of socialism (such as the problem of economic calculation), but I hope this essay serves to point readers away from trying to merge the two systems together. Such an attempt is like mixing oil and water, though a violent shake may produce a semblance of mixture, they must soon separate.

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