

# WAY TO SHILOH

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## **Hammer and sickle** **(Marxism and Communism)**

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Hegel and Feuerbach had a powerful influence on many of their contemporary thinkers and on those who immediately followed them. One young German student who adopted their ideas might have seemed an unlikely candidate for inclusion with them in a survey of nineteenth-century atheistic Western philosophy, especially if it had been known that he would spend most of his life in poor health, psychological insecurity (he had a nervous breakdown while still a teenager) and financial difficulty. Yet he was to leave his mark on the lives of more millions of people than either of them, and his impact was such that we must give him additional space. His name was Karl Marx (1818-1883).

Marx came from a Jewish family and was born in the ancient Rhineland city of Trier. He was sent to a church school, but there was little or no pressure on him to commit himself to any religious cause, and eventually he declared himself an atheist. In his early twenties, he became the editor of a radical newspaper, a post which enabled him to spread his ideas widely until the paper was shut down by the authorities. In 1844, he met the political theorist and socialist revolutionary Friedrich Engels in Paris. Not only did they become lifelong friends, but Engels, a successful businessman, proved a vital source of funds for Marx, who was rarely in regular employment. Caught up in the revolutionary activity of the times, Marx was expelled from Paris and spent five years in Brussels. In 1848, he and Engels published *The Communist Manifesto*, a statement of principles urging workers to overthrow the ruling classes. One clause in the manifesto clearly reflected its authors' atheism: 'Communism abolishes all religion and all morality.' Although acquitted on a charge of sedition, Marx was expelled from Germany and in 1849, when thirty-one years of age, he moved to London, where he was to spend the rest of his life. For most of this time he lived in abject poverty. When one of their children died his wife had to beg money from a neighbour to buy a coffin, and in later years he was to write, 'I have sacrificed my whole fortune to the revolutionary struggle.'

For many years, he spent up to nine hours a day studying and writing in the British Museum. In 1861 he began to concentrate on *Das Kapital*, which he considered his major work and which was published in 1867. Ironically, income from his writing eventually put him into the very economic bracket which *Das Kapital* condemned, but his final days were desperately unhappy, and he sank into deep depression before his death in 1883.

Marx was not a philosopher. He once said,

'Philosophers have always interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it,' yet he drew on many thinkers in the distant and immediate past in formulating his communistic system of society. His doctoral thesis examined the ideas of Democritus and Epicurus, two of the ancient Greek atomists, and, like them, he believed our universe to be a closed system in which everything has a 'natural' explanation. From the generation immediately preceding his own he adopted Hegel's idea of history as a dialectical process, with thesis, antithesis and synthesis continuing to bring about higher stages of existence. However, Marx's basic world-view would not allow him to swallow Hegel whole, and in place of dialectical idealism he put dialectical materialism, in which he saw society's economic forces as the motor driving history on to the ideal. Marx reduced all of history to five stages: the primitive, communal stage, when people owned everything in common; the slave stage; the feudal society; the bourgeois or capitalist society (dominant in his day) and the socialist or communist stage, the goal for which he aimed. Within this framework, he saw the class struggle in which he immersed himself as a titanic effort to get from the fourth stage to the classless society of the fifth.

In its early development, Marxism owed a great deal to Feuerbach; at one point Engels said, 'We were all enchanted by him and for a time became Feuerbachians.' Marx was particularly attracted to Feuerbach's emphasis on man, rather than on the supernatural and transcendent, and on the fact that he made 'the

social relationship of "man to man" the basic principle of his theory'. Yet he thought that Feuerbach was too abstract and that in wanting to get rid of theology but keep religion (even as nothing more than self-projection) he did not go far enough. Marx wanted to get rid of both, and made no bones about his position: 'Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion, as the illusory happiness of men, is a demand for their real happiness.' Elsewhere he wrote, 'Religion is just the imaginary sun which seems to man to revolve around him, until he realizes that he himself is the centre of his own revolution. As Marx saw it, religion caused people to think in terms of an afterlife in another world, when they should be working to change the one in which they now lived. They were driven to this, not by any inherent spiritual dimension, but by social injustice and the inhumane use of material power. What the masses failed to see was that the ruling classes were drip-feeding them with 'pie-in-the-sky' religion as some kind of consolation in their downtrodden condition. When social and economic oppression had been removed by communism, religion - which he once called 'flowers on the chains of our oppression' - would disappear and man would live contentedly in a classless society in which the supernatural would play no part in his thinking. Needless to say, Marx rejected all forms of theism out of hand. In the foreword to his doctoral thesis he openly declared, 'I harbour hate against all the gods.' What is more, he was sure that he was on the right track and would eventually lead humanity out of its religious ignorance and superstition: 'I will wander godlike and victorious through the ruins of the world. And giving my words an active force, I will feel equal to the creator.'

In the early part of the twentieth century, massive strides were taken to put Marx's theories into practice. Leading this determined drive was the Russian leader Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (1870-1924), also known as Vladimir Ilyich, but best known as Lenin; a single-minded radical who became the century's most successful revolutionary. Hardened by working underground for over twenty years in Russia and elsewhere, Lenin and his Bolsheviks (roughly meaning 'those in the majority') seized control of the country soon after the Russian czar was deposed in 1917. In the seven years that remained before his death he ruthlessly set about applying Marx's theories.

Although he reshaped some aspects of Marxism to meet his goals, Lenin retained its essential principles, including its dogmatic atheism. On religion in general, he echoed Marx's own words: 'Religion is opium for the people. Religion is a kind of spiritual intoxicant in which the slaves of capitalism drown their humanity and blunt their desire for a decent human existence.' In a letter to Maxim Gorky, sometimes known as the father of Soviet literature, he wrote, 'There can be nothing more abominable than religion.' In Lenin's view, this dogma needed to be firmly applied at a personal level: 'Every religious idea, every idea of god, every flirtation with the idea of God is unutterable vileness... Any person who engages in building a god, or who even tolerates the idea of god-building, disparages himself in the worst possible fashion.

Early in the revolution, religion was seen as the major threat and steps were therefore taken to neutralize it. An avalanche of laws, increasingly oppressive, began to restrict religious activity. In 1918, priests and bishops were robbed of certain important rights, and were classed with idiots as being unproductive in the cause of Communism. The religious instruction of children and young people was slowly stifled and believers were forbidden to teach in schools and universities. Heavy financial burdens were imposed on churches, forcing thousands to close, and cathedrals in Kazan and Leningrad were turned into anti-religious museums. The Union of Militant Atheists, founded with the motto 'The fight against religion is the fight for socialism', produced a stream of films, plays, lectures and radio broadcasts. Many of those who refused to abandon their belief in God were sent to mental institutions, prisons, concentration camps or the grave.

After Lenin's death in 1924, his place was taken by Josef Stalin (1879-1953). A one-time seminary student studying to be a minister of religion, Stalin turned his back on God, became one of the main architects of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and remorselessly continued to impose his interpretation of Marxist-Leninist ideas on the vast numbers of people under his control. The Godless Union was founded, and by 1932 had seven million members organized into 80,000 cells. A League of Militant Godless encouraged young people to oppose religion of every kind, and in one year alone published some fourteen million pieces of atheistic literature.

On a wider front, upwards of twenty million people were herded into slave-labour battalions to help in developing a socialist state. Some fourteen million were imprisoned, often in vile conditions. Stalin was 'but old Lenin writ large' and his contempt for God was especially demonstrated in his vicious persecution of believers, many of whom died for their faith in the course of a vicious purge which, in one authority's estimate, led to the systematic slaughter of some ten million people.

Stalin was followed by a succession of leaders who presided over what was soon to become a spiralling decline in the great Marxist enterprise but, although they made token concessions under pressure from the international community, none of them renounced atheism. One year after his appointment as General Secretary of the USSR in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev was calling for more aggressive atheistic education and describing the struggle with traditional religion as 'decisive and uncompromising', but other forces were at work and three years later the USSR collapsed.

In 1983, the dissident Soviet author Alexander Solzhenitsyn was presented with the prestigious Templeton Prize for progress in religion. In accepting the award, he gave this clear assessment of what

lay behind the tragedy that had wrecked his country: 'I have spent well-nigh fifty years working on the history of our Revolution. In the process, I have read hundreds of books, collected hundreds of personal testimonies, and have already contributed eight volumes of my own towards the effort of clearing away the rubble left by that upheaval. But if I were asked today the main cause of the ruinous Revolution that has swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: "Men have forgotten God; that's why all this has happened."

Although only eleven people attended Marx's graveside funeral in London's Highgate Cemetery in 1883, Engels said in his eulogy, 'His name will endure through the years, and so also will his work.' In one sense this has proved to be the case, because by 1980 some twenty-eight nations, representing 1.5 billion people (more than one-third of the world's population) were governed by Marxist regimes. More importantly from our present perspective, these regimes were all committed to an atheistic agenda and engaged to a greater or lesser extent in the repression and persecution of those who believed in God. Two countries in particular provide horrific evidence of what happened as a result.

In 1949 the Communist revolutionary Mao Tse-tung established the People's Republic of China and, in the course of imposing his regime, expelled all foreign missionaries, liquidated religious organizations and subjected believers to cruel and relentless persecution. Many thousands of them were put to death as Mao sought to accelerate the Marxist revolution in a gigantic piece of social engineering that was eventually to cost the lives of millions; at one stage, opponents of his plans were being executed at the rate of over 22,000 a month. Towards the end of his life, as his diseased mind oscillated between religion and secular belief, Mao is reported to have said, 'My body is riddled with diseases. I have an appointment with God.' Mao kept that appointment on 9 September 1976.

The Cambodian Marxist Pol Pot was another who tried to create instant atheistic Communism in his country. With his Khmer Rouge guerrillas as an instrument, Pol Pot set his sights on 'stripping away, through terror and other means, the traditional bases, structures and forces which have shaped and guided an individual's life' and then 'rebuilding him according to party doctrines by substituting a series of new values' The blood-letting in the 'killing fields' of Cambodia was terrible. Between April 1975 and January 1977, over 1,500,000 people, one-fifth of the country's population, were slaughtered. As with his Marxist-Leninist heroes in the USSR, Pol Pot's atheism was one of the forces which drove his agenda. As part of his revenge on religion (he had been educated in a monastery) Cambodia's religious leaders were prime targets in his programme of systematic slaughter and of the country's 60,000 monks only a few hundred survived. Ironically, Pol Pot died peacefully in his sleep in April 1998.

In giving these details I am not suggesting that atheism automatically leads to barbarity, nor am I claiming that all atheists would endorse this kind of cruelty. Nevertheless, atheists must face this question: in the absence of any moral law grounded in God, on what basis can we deny any the right to frame their own sets of values and seek to impose them on others? Pol Pot, for example, was not only a crude Marxist but a passionate nationalist. He believed that the way to Cambodian prosperity was to wipe out the urban elite - 'To spare you is no profit; to destroy you is no loss,' was one of his favourite slogans - and to give power to the peasantry. On what grounds can an atheist question what he did?

## **Marxism under the microscope**

Mounting a critique of Marxist-Leninism is not difficult, though there are areas in which Marx pointed out features in society which needed to be addressed and corrected. He was undoubtedly right in much of what he said about economics, labour and the exploitation of the poor. Again, religion has sometimes been misused for social, economic and political oppression, though this is a long way from proving that every religion has done so. There are those who have used religion as a crutch, but this hardly warrants tarring everyone with the same brush, and Marx makes no contribution to the fundamental debate on the existence of God. In turning from this truly remarkable man, here are some of the key questions that need to be asked:

- If the state is self-sufficient, self-justifying and a law unto itself, where does this leave individual freedom of thought and direction?
- If there is no God, and no other absolute beyond the existence of matter, how can there be any ultimate source of truth as a reference point by which an objective system of law and order can be assessed?
- If man has no soul, and all 'goodness' and 'truth' are relative to time and space, how can any abiding value be attributed to man as an individual?

As Charles MacKenzie asks, 'How can man experience, use and organize nature while being nothing more than a part of nature? Does not his capability to subdue and direct nature imply that man is above nature?'

Marxism claims that human beings are completely material, biological entities, and are in that sense on the same level as animals, but what explanation does it offer for their spiritual self-awareness, or for their

longing for the transcendent? If man is really nothing more than matter, where does he get his conscience, willpower, creative impulses, aspirations, creativity, hope and imagination, or concepts such as love and beauty?

A major plank in Marx's philosophy (lifted from Hegel) is the notion that mankind is inherently good and merely needs efficient leadership to bring it to perfection. Paul Johnson easily knocks this idea on the head: 'We can see... that Hegel was wrong because we have had demonstrated, before our eyes, the catastrophic failure of the system based on the ideas of his most influential follower, Karl Marx. The collapse of the Communist empire, or realized Marxism, in total and unqualified ruin, has been a vivid and costly and utterly persuasive demonstration that Hegel's central proposition, translated by Marx into political and economic forms, is false. Humankind may improve and learn to behave better, at any rate up to a point, but it does not change in fundamentals, and "Utopian visions are dangerous fallacies". Nobody could show that Western capitalism has all the answers, but how does one square the socialist claim of leading the state's citizens to perfection with the pride, greed and ruthless cruelty of the leaders concerned? Why did a system based on reason and idealism spawn what Johnson calls 'every form of corruption known to man' Charles MacKenzie focuses on one specific failure: 'One hundred years after Marx's death no society has yet achieved pure Communism. Socialist countries have simply exchanged ownership of capitalists for that of party leaders who live as luxuriously and rule more absolutely than any capitalist ever did.'

Where is the proof for Marx's fundamental assertion that religion is imaginary, nothing more than a projected longing, an idea which is absolutely basic to his communistic model?

If changing the system would cause the notion of religion to fade from people's minds as a matter of course, why did Communist dictators in the USSR and elsewhere find it necessary to close down countless thousands of churches and other places of worship, brutalize religious leaders, force atheism on to the educational curriculum and slaughter millions of believers?

What explanation can Marxism give for the fact that, in spite of massive and systematic attempts by one Communist government after another to eliminate religion, it has not only survived but emerged from persecution stronger than ever? Conceding (as some Marxists do) that religion will always have some kind of secondary role until a truly classless society is achieved is clearly special pleading.

The Marxist revolution and the subsequent government of China, Russia and Eastern Europe for most of the twentieth century has been called the greatest experiment in consistent atheism that the world has so far seen, yet it has proved a catastrophic failure. An East European once made the shrewd comment that the only difference between capitalism and Communism is that with capitalism man exploits man and with Communism the reverse is the case! It is said that an old woman once asked Mikhail Gorbachev whether Communism had been invented by a politician or a scientist. Gorbachev replied that he was not sure, but thought it was a politician. 'That explains it,' said the woman. 'If it had been a scientist he would have tried it on mice first.'

There was a time when Marxism seemed to be establishing itself as a creditable alternative to theism, and many believed that it had God on the run. Now, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it lies in a discredited and shameful heap on the graves of those massacred in pursuit of its godless ideas. The Black Book of Communism, written by a group of left-wing historians and published in 1997, puts the number of victims since the Russian Revolution eighty years earlier at between eighty-five million and 100 million. Paul Johnson went even further and wrote that in the twentieth century alone the totalitarian state proved itself to be 'the greatest killer of all time' and that by the 1990s, 'State action had been responsible for the violent or unnatural deaths of some 125 million people during the century, more perhaps than it has succeeded in destroying during the whole of human history up to 1900.' As Johnson notes elsewhere, Marxism, along with other modern totalitarian alternatives to God, has been 'demonstrated to be incorrigibly destructive and evil'.

One might add that there is a tragic irony in Marxist governments spending vast fortunes trying to destroy religion which they claimed to have no foundation, and forbidding their people to worship a God they claim does not exist!

*Extract from 'Does God believe in Atheists? By John Blanchard*