

Immodest visions: Millennial hopes

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Ten years ago this month, the Berlin Wall was breached. Within months the once monolithic world of the Soviet bloc was dismantled and the claims of Karl Marx decisively discredited. Seldom have historical events provided such a concrete repudiation of a political vision and, in this case, of a quasi-religious faith.

Marxism was, as many commentators have noted, a secularized form of Christian millennialism. Marx believed that history was headed toward a realm of peace, righteousness and freedom-not through the workings of divine providence but through the logic of social relations and the forces of material production. For Marx, every phase of human history is a necessary chapter in the saga of humanity's self-realization. He thought that when the exploitative nature of capitalism fully manifested itself, as it inevitably would, a new realm of freedom and solidarity would emerge through the iron laws of material relations.

Such a faith now seems more fantastic than belief in UFOs. For better or worse, few people today can imagine a political and social future whose basic forms and organizing tools are significantly different from those of the present-which means some version of liberal democracy and a free-market economy.

Compared to utopian visions of a universal classless society and the withering-away of the state, the political task at hand seems modest: to create not a workers' paradise (nor for that matter a managers' paradise), but to achieve greater justice amid the decidedly imperfect arrangements of democracy and the creative destructiveness of capitalism.

But the loss of imaginative images of the new and the different is a serious matter in the "modest" work of social, political and economic reform. Will a young man in Los Angeles's inner city or a young mother in Calcutta rejoice at the thought that their lives might be slightly improved because of regulatory changes in the way corporations are allowed to do business, or because of adjustments in the tax system?

Christians have always believed that radical hope in a new future is rooted in the workings of a just God whose governance over the world is both promise and reality. In obedience to and expectation of that governance, they labor for a world in which the oppressors' power will be broken and justice and integrity established. That is an immodest vision that cannot be breached or dismantled. And it must not be abandoned.