

## Mystical communism

By [Donald Donato](#)

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Analyzing the relationship between faith and the political left—its history and present condition—reveals a century filled with antagonisms. But there are also affinities and technologies for continuing rapprochement.

Historically there has been an undeniable antagonism between religion and communism. Yet the two share moral and ontological space. At its base, communism is a movement of working-class power seeking to place the ownership of social production into the commons through a transition known as socialism. Karl Marx's sentiment that religion is the "opium of the people" has been misinterpreted. Consider the context of his statement:

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Marx does not disqualify spiritual technology, ritual, or belief. Rather, he exposes religion's role in maintaining the silent tyranny of poverty and inequality through pious complacency. He points to the collaboration of the church and its clergy, seats of wealth and power that use atonement theology for the purpose of oppressing the people.

Yet there are affinities between communism and religion. Like all human systems, communism has suffered horrible losses and distortions—and few organizations could understand the consequences of human error as well as the church does. Abuse, holy wars, and persecutions know no ideological bounds. Despite these failings, neither the church nor communism lost its core meaning. The two began to coalesce in the rise of [liberation theology](#) in the 1970s.

But the underlying religiosity of communism is far older and deeper. One school of Bolshevik spirituality bore a striking resemblance to the Gnostic tradition. [Maxim](#)

[Gorky](#), [Anatoly Lunacharsky](#), and [Alexander Bogdanov](#) gave the first sketches of a mystical communism that encompassed spiritual traditions leading all the way back to the [Bogomils](#) and ancient Gnostics.

This Soviet mystery school was called “[God-building](#),” and its praxis was aimed at unifying the consciousness of individuals in [theurgical](#) fashion. During the revolution of 1905, the God-builders sought nothing less than to transcend the spirit-matter dichotomy. Christian sacramentalists will understand the transcendence of that dichotomy as the essence of the Eucharist, while Marxists would call this alchemical operation the “union of opposites.”

Lunacharsky, the first Soviet commissar of education after the 1917 revolution, went so far as to write that “Scientific socialism is the most religious of all religions.” Essentially syncretic, the God-builders followed a spiritual thread from the Eleusinian mysteries of ancient Greece to Feuerbach and *fin-de-siècle* symbolism. Also drawing on native spirituality, Gorky in particular was influenced by groups of Russian peasants. Their communal healings and mindfulness exercises, based in the [Hesychast](#) tradition, inspired his book [The Confession](#).

If there is a place for communism and religion to cohabitate, it seems natural that it would be in the eternal reality where ritual and consciousness lie waiting to achieve what the single individual cannot. Literature, theater, arts, and initiation are powerful rituals that communism has used to build *esprit de corps*. These rituals focus the consciousness of the members on a task. The [egregore](#) created by the group is a manifestation of the members’ active consciousness, which can do things that individuals cannot. This phenomenon resembles the power of prayer as practiced among Christians.

The God-builders were especially adept at recognizing the power of social mindfulness, and they offer an ontological and moral starting point for development. The action of love in John 15:17 is simultaneously the ultimate revolutionary act and the organizing principle of this new cadre. To build communities able to take on the formidable challenges facing our world requires liberation from the illusion that would have us cherish material things over people. It is in that struggle that a Christian communism is born.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward](#)*

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