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Communism

Trym

2019

The word communism evokes a lot of fear and memories from the Cold War era. Many people in Sweden also have a very strong fear of Russia mixed into the mix, or their own memories of the authoritarian and totalitarian states that are associated with the word communism. But what is it really, and how much communism is there in the Bible?

The Swedish Academy's dictionary describes communism as follows (my emphasis):

”a social system characterized by the economic equality of members of the society and by complete community of property (implemented partly in primitive societies and partly in certain smaller societies, e.g. the first Christian congregations, monastic communities, etc.); a doctrine of a direction that aims to introduce a similar social system in modern states; cf. SOCIALISM; especially a doctrine of a direction that aims to introduce a similar social system by revolutionary means, including the establishment of a ”dictatorship

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of the proletariat” after the Russian model; cf. BOLSCHEVISM.”

Complete community of property is a confusing formulation. Rather, it should be understood as a common ownership of the tools and institutions we need to live and survive together. In addition to referring to an ideological orientation in states that have been called or called themselves communist, anthropologist David Graeber writes in his book “Debt – the First 5000 Years” about communism as something more universal:

“Any human relationship that operates on the principles of ‘from each [giving] according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.’
(Quote excerpted from http://inesad.edu.bo/developmentroast/2012/04/is-it-me-or-is-communism-everywhere/?upm_export=print)

A friend of mine pointed out that this principle can be traced back to the books of Moses and the story of the Israelites’ deliverance from Egypt.

“15 When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, “What is this?” because they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, “It is the food that the Lord has given you to eat. 16 This is what the Lord has commanded: Gather as much as each person needs, an omer for each person. Each householder is to take for those who are in their tents.” 17 The Israelites did so, and some gathered more, some less. 18 When they measured it out, those who gathered more did not have too much, and those who gathered less did not have too little; everyone had enough.” (Exodus 16:15-18)

The idea that such principles could be applied on a societal level comes from the ideals of the Enlightenment. Many of these ideas draw on Christian tradition. After the Reformation and the neo-Baptist readership movements, where more people were able to read the Bible and have had the opportunity to absorb the socially radical message of the Bible. Ideas about economic redistribution are one of the clearest common threads in the Bible, up to the primitive communism of the Jerusalem congregation described in the Acts of the Apostles.

“43 All the people were amazed, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. 44 The believers continued to gather together and had everything in common. 45 They sold everything they owned and had and distributed it to all, as anyone had need.” (Acts 2:43-45)

Communism could therefore be applied as a deeply Christian principle. Paul writes in Second Thessalonians 3:10 that whoever does not want to work shall not eat. We should therefore contribute according to our ability and in a communist congregation we can hope that God will give us according to our needs. Jesus’ teaching urges us and encourages reflection and dialogue. Jesus prescribes an upside-down Kingdom of God where the least is the greatest and where the master is the servant of all. The congregational community and the choice to belong to the Kingdom of God are also very much voluntary (1 Tim 4:8-10). It is therefore a completely different order than an authoritarian, state communism. Built on coercion and the threat of violence or punishment. Rather, such a Christian norm resembles (and inspired) Kropotkin’s anarchist communism.

The word communism makes many people stop listening. At the same time, the word denotes an important principle, deeply rooted in the Bible and in parts of the Christian tradition. It is also a principle that would have benefited the idea and

practice of the church, or faith and life, if it had been practiced. Communism is therefore a word worth using, reestablishing, and reclaiming from the history of crimes against humanity that has sunk the concept.