

Was atheism the cause of 20th century atrocities?

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Introduction

It is a frequent rejoinder and polemic hurled about by religious apologists. Yes, certain murderous excesses like crusades, inquisitions, and witch hunts may have been committed by the religious, but they pale in comparison to those done in the cause of atheism. Stalin, Hitler, Mao, Pol Pot-strident atheists all whose famines, wars, genocides, and purges created magnitudes more dead. Consider, for example, these words from militant Christian cheerleader, [Dinesh D'Souza](#):

These figures are tragic, and of course population levels were much lower at the time. But even so, they are minuscule compared with the death tolls produced by the atheist despotisms of the 20th century. In the name of creating their version of a religion-free utopia, Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong produced the kind of mass slaughter that no Inquisitor could possibly match. Collectively these atheist tyrants murdered more than 100 million people.

As a student of Soviet history and communist ideology (MA in Russian Studies, Georgetown University), I was surprised to encounter such accusations when I first heard them. Never in my studies had I come across this view, neither in the scholarly literature nor in the classroom. Some might dismiss this as simply evidence of the university's deeply liberal and secular bias, yet scholars of a conservative bent, such as [Hannah Arendt](#) and [Richard Pipes](#) (with whom I tended to agree), were a core part of my curriculum. My graduate studies were also completed at a university founded and run by [Jesuits](#), not exactly proponents of skepticism.

It is not difficult to see why today's religious apologists are so eager to impugn atheism in this way. Skepticism and secularism, if not outright rejection of religion, are growing in increasing favor among nations and regions where age-old religious traditions have kept them employed. Mass terror attacks, suicide bombings, and intractable religious strife have coalesced to focus hard attention, once again, on the seamier side of faith. Religious belief is thus on the defensive. Unable to wholly reject the skeptics' barbs, its apologists consequently respond with this moral equivalency argument. Bad things have been done in religion's name, they acknowledge, but worse have been done by those who have none. Apparently, religion is to be preferred because it has produced fewer horrors than the alternative.

Behind all the noise generated by religion's apologists, is there perhaps a grain of truth? If there is, I have not uncovered it. *In fact, I know of no reputable historian of the communist experience who believes atheism plays any meaningful role, much less the actual basis.* Arendt's *Totalitarianism*, which stands as "the definitive account of the philosophical origins of the totalitarian mind," never once mentions atheism. I have frequently challenged believers to produce a single professional historian who agrees with their thesis, but not one has been able. Could the historical revisionism be another example of their long-practiced art of [pious fraud](#)?

What lies behind the seductive appeal of their thesis is the notion - conceit, really - that one cannot be moral without belief in some Supreme Moral Lawgiver. As a Christian apologist [explains](#),

No matter how sincerely I believe I am right about some moral decision, the true test is in the origin of that belief. And God is the only universal and absolute origin to all morality...

If we don't believe we are created by God, but simply highly evolved animals, and if we believe we have accountability only to society, then there is no end to the depths of depravity that we can go in our search to justify our actions. Corrosion of morals begins in microscopic proportions, but if not checked by a standard beyond ourselves, it will continue until the corrosion wipes away the very foundation of our lives, and we find ourselves sinking in a sea of relativity.

Unfortunately, this claim simply has not been borne out in practice, and is soundly refuted in the skeptical literature. The vast number of non-believers who lead ethical lives - as well as the notable cases of high-profile believers who don't - demonstrates that god-belief makes one no more or less moral. A growing body of scientific evidence posits an explanation why: [morality likely has a biological basis](#). Many theists, such as the renowned Christian apologist C. S. Lewis, counter that the basis is of divine origin, a "natural law" written upon man's heart by God ([Romans 2:14-15](#)). Perhaps, but in claiming such a law, religion's apologists have unwittingly undermined their argument that atheism inevitably leads to "the depths of depravity." Did atheists somehow figure out a way to overrule an act of God?

With that said, I now debunk the thesis that atheism lies at the bottom of the previous century's brutal regimes. I start with Hitler's Nazism, for which there is virtually no basis at all.

Nazism and atheism - Where's the beef?

Although outside my area of expertise, the suggestion that atheism played any part in shaping the policies of the Third Reich is simply beyond the realm of historical plausibility. For starters, there is the well-documented [mingling](#) between Christians and the Nazis, the democratic election of whom could not have been achieved without the former's support. Next, if any doctrine can be said to have inspired Nazi genocidal anti-semitism, one need look no further than that which was [enunciated](#) by one of Germany's most celebrated Christian theologians, Martin Luther, in his *On the Jews and Their Lies*. Finally, Nazis identified themselves as implacable foes of the emerging ideology to their east. As Hitler himself [stated](#),

For their interests [the Church's] cannot fail to coincide with ours [the National Socialists] alike in our fight against the symptoms of degeneracy in the world of to-day, in our fight against a Bolshevik culture, **against atheistic movement**, against criminality, and in our struggle for a consciousness of a community in our national life. (emphasis mine)

Further reading: [Hitler Was an Atheist Who Killed Millions in the Name of Atheism, Secularism?](#)

'Nuff said. Below are the main reasons why the alleged atheism = despotism charge is false.

1) Communism is a synthesis of assorted 19th century theories and philosophies

Communism served as the core ideology, with some modification and variants, for the world's socialist despotisms. It is, [according](#) to a chief proponent, "the doctrine of the conditions of the liberation of the proletariat." How such conditions would come about was a subject of much debate (and conflict), but Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engels's vision (i.e., Marxism) held primary sway among the doctrine's adherents.

Marx and Engels manifestly asserted that the necessary pre-condition for any communist society was the abolition of private property, which they identified as the key institution responsible for subjugating the working class, the proletariat. The elimination of private property was thus *the* "[main demand](#)" of

the communist. How dirty private property is to the communist mind is difficult to relate, but consider this: for all its vaunted market reforms, it was only *four years ago* that China's ruling Communist Party finally [endorsed](#) private property in the country's constitution. The few socialist hold-outs such as Cuba and North Korea have not even gone that far.

Marx and Engels did not craft their theories from whole cloth; rather, their views were drawn from a hodge-podge of 19th century economists, political scientists, philosophers, and historians, from Adam Smith to Immanuel Kant. Theists frequently cite the work of Ludwig Feuerbach on Marx's thinking, particularly his *The Essence of Christianity*, which argued that God is really a creation of man. But the influence is overplayed and critical departures papered over. For Marx, religion *is the result of* man's conditions, not their source, something which he [criticized](#) Feuerbach for failing to realize. "Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the 'religious sentiment' is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs to a particular form of society." Feuerbach believed that the idea of God alienated man, while for Marx, it was the social conditions which alienated.

Another doctrine said to heavily influence Marx is materialism. Theists claim that materialism, which holds that everything in existence is derived from matter, logically leads to amorality since there is "no reason" to act good. This objection is odd, since many of these same theists believe acting good matters for naught in obtaining heaven; it is belief in and utterance of the correct doctrines which decides. But fundamentally, the accusation fails because it confuses ontology with ethics, "what is" with "what ought to be". As we are almost daily reminded by suicide bombers, religious belief is no barrier itself to murderous brutality (if not a catalyst for it).

In any case, theists misunderstand the materialism of Marx and Engels, who, more precisely, believed in *historical materialism*. Historical materialism asserts that the development of a human society - its economics, politics, history - is derived from its production relations. A fuller treatment of the topic is beyond our scope, but it should be clear that Marx and Engels had a specific conception of materialism in mind, one that is far from widely held, even among materialists.

Rather than the lynchpin of communist ideology, as the theistic apologists would have us believe, atheism enters by way of a deep ambivalence toward religion, which Marx and Engels saw as a by-product of oppressive social conditions. Other influences, however, played a stronger role, both in communist ideology and practice.

One such influence was the critique of private property put forward by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon. His *What is Property?*, which famously declared that "property is theft," was the key work in convincing Marx that private property should be abolished. Where did Proudhon himself get this idea? As he [wrote](#), "My real masters, those who have caused fertile ideas to spring up in my mind, are three in number: **first, the Bible**; next, Adam Smith; and last, Hegel." (emphasis mine) Understandably, Christian apologists fail to mention Proudhon's influence on the development of communism, if they are even aware of it at all.

An important component of communist practice is the belief that the morality of an action is determined solely by whether it advances the cause of the proletarian revolution. In other words, "the ends justify the means" when the end is the supremacy of the working class. While Marx and Engels occasionally spoke of "independent morality based on human dignity," later communist theorists like Leon Trotsky dismissed this view. As Nicholas Churchich [writes](#) in *Marxism and Morality*, "For Trotsky...deceit, violence and murder, if they serve the proletarian political ends are perfectly 'moral' and should be employed without hesitation." Communists like Stalin, Mao, and Pol Pot followed this ethic unwaveringly.

There is more to be said about the fabric of thought which comprised communism's tapestry, particularly its tremendously varied strands, including explicit Christian [expressions](#), but I think the

point is more than established: atheism is a peripheral and even unnecessary component of communist ideology.

2) Communism is primarily anti-religious, not atheistic

We saw above that communism as expressed by Marx and Engels included an anti-religious bent. Theistic apologists, in a sleight of hand, conflate this anti-religiosity with atheism, though the connection between the two is tenuous at best. To be sure, atheists are sometimes anti-religious, but their opposition is usually to the type of domineering religion which seeks to force non-believers to adhere to its metaphysical and theological claims. Atheism, which is merely the lack of belief in god(s), does not inevitably and logically lead to anti-religiosity. To buttress the point, consider [deism](#), which has long disparaged organized religion. Today's secular societies, which include significant numbers of atheists, are wholly tolerant of religious believers - as long as these believers keep their faith-based dogmas and conflicts out of the realm of public policy.

Today, we find it difficult to relate to the minds of 18th and 19th intellectuals, many of whom viewed religion as a force for ill in society. We and our immediate ancestors were not subject to its endless wars, its hostility to liberty and democracy, its thought control, and its support for despots and tyrants, when not ruled by the church's version of the same. But centuries ago, in Marx's time, the landscape of recent history was vastly different. Many, including Marx and those who followed him, viewed organized religion with some justification as a reactionary and tyrannical institution, which severely discredited religion's metaphysical claims. In Russia, for example, where an attempt to build a communist society was first undertaken, the Russian Orthodox Church had remained a central pillar supporting the corrupt and in-bred tsarist autocracy long after similar religious influence had waned in other parts of Europe. Its support for the White Army in the civil war which followed the communist takeover of 1917 no doubt cemented Bolshevik belief that the Church was "counter-revolutionary" and dangerous, to be eradicated at the earliest opportunity.

Marx believed that religion would fall to the wayside as the conditions which gave rise to it succumbed to history's inevitable march toward a communist future. Vladimir Lenin, however, reflecting on the failure of Marx's predictions, believed that this future could be obtained by a forced march, through a state-directed eradication of bourgeois institutions, like religion, and the creation of a socialist, heavy industrial economy. Only in this way could the proper proletarian class consciousness develop and communism finally arise.

Anti-religiosity found in socialist states had its genesis in Marxism, but it was Lenin (and later, Stalin) who gave it full flower, as part of a radical transformation of society along communist lines and as a reaction to the pre-revolutionary past. Unable to demonstrate the necessary links between atheism and this unprecedented type of revolution, religious apologists thus erroneously conflate atheism with anti-religiosity, as well as ignore the historical circumstances which gave the latter special potency and allure.

3) Persecution, oppression, and murder were virtually indiscriminate under 20th century despotisms

A salient feature of all the 20th century's communist dictatorships was the widespread and indiscriminate use of terror against any opposition, both real and *perceived*. Virtually no one was spared, up to and including members of the inner circle of the ruling clique. The reasons are rooted in the dogmatism of Marxist-Leninist ideology, in the political cultures inherited by the new regimes, but mostly in the fact that all power was centralized under a single, unaccountable ruling party or individual. "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely," as Lord Acton famously put it. Whenever such totalitarian dictatorship arises, regardless of its ideological, political, or social

character, tyranny is the inevitable result. The only variable is its extent.

Believers make much hay over religious persecution under socialist regimes, and indeed, they suffered heavily. But they ignore the fact that everyone else suffered too, including other communists and workers. Of most significance was one's class background, which communists believed determined one's reaction to the revolution. The stance was [summarized](#) thus:

Do not look in the file of incriminating evidence to see whether or not the accused rose up against the Soviets with arms or words. Ask him instead to which class he belongs, what is his background, his education, his profession. These are the questions that will determine the fate of the accused. That is the meaning and essence of [Lenin's] Red Terror.

Under the hyper-paranoid atmosphere of Stalin's reign in the 1930s, even this distinction fell away, as identification of "enemies of the state" became a mandate against which almost no one was safe (e.g., [the Great Purge](#)). This form of political terror was long practiced before Stalin and Hitler; consider, for example, the Catholic Church's inquisitions against "heretics". But the key difference, the special condition which drove the 20th century communists like Mao to such murderous ends, was the belief, in Stalin's words, that "terror is the quickest way to a new society." The vast swathe of murder committed in the name of this new society gives lie to the claim that it was merely a "religion-free" one that was sought

Indiscriminate terror as a political means to bring about the communist future is neither accounted for nor explained by religious apologists. If the motivator of communist despots was atheism, then one would expect exclusive attention paid to believers - an impression they strive mightily to establish. But, as we have seen, the impression is a gross distortion of historical reality. Nothing was done "in the name of atheism," but in the name of the proletariat and a new communist order. This is why not only believers were tyrannized, but peasants, land owners, workers, ethnic nationalities, factory owners, intellectuals, members of rival communist organizations, and even the regime's own founders. All were trampled under communism's march.

A final point. As mentioned, communist regimes did target believers for persecution, but its application was not consistent. In the Soviet Union, some churches and faiths were especially brutalized, but others, like Islam, experienced official co-option from agencies such as Spiritual Administration of the Muslims. As the Soviet Union entered the second world war, the Russian Orthodox Church was enlisted to support Stalin's government in the country's defense - support which it unreservedly granted by naming Stalin as [divinely appointed](#), just as it had done under the Russian tsars. Later years saw a waxing and waning of official toleration for religion, until the Gorbachev era, which lifted a great many restrictions. If theists wish to claim religious oppression under communism as a natural outgrowth of atheism, they need to explain the variety and inconsistency of this oppression as well.

4) Communism has more in common with religion than it does with skepticism

As I alluded to above, the patterns of persecution experienced under 20th century despotism bear striking resemblance to those committed by religion. This is no accident or coincidence. There are at least four common features which religion and communist dictatorships share that explain why.

The first similarity is belief in some *dogmatic truth*. Marx and Engels believed they had discovered immutable historical laws, scientific in their predictive power, the correctness of which there was no doubt. This gave them, and their communist followers, tremendous confidence in the future; the fall of capitalism and subsequent rise of communism were historically [inevitable](#). As Lenin described:

Marx's theory is the objective truth. Following the path of this theory, we will approach the

objective truth more and more closely, while if we follow any other path we cannot arrive at anything except confusion and falsehood. From the philosophy of Marxism, cast of one piece of steel, it is impossible to expunge a single basic premise, a single essential part, without deviating from objective truth, without falling into the arms of bourgeois-reactionary falsehood.

This statement of unalloyed dogmatism is precisely echoed in the [Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy](#), which many Christian organizations mandate its members affirm:

Holy Scripture, being God's own Word, written by men prepared and superintended by his Spirit, is of infallible divine authority in all matters upon which it touches: it is to be believed, as God's instruction, in all that it affirms... The authority of Scripture is inescapably impaired if this total divine inerrancy is in any way limited or disregarded, or made relative to a view of truth contrary to the Bible's own; and such lapses bring serious loss to both the individual and the church.

The second similarity is *hostility to liberty and independent thought*. Although some faith traditions have largely embraced the ideals of freedom, a good many other traditions remain anywhere from fair-weather friends to implacable opponents. It is true that some of liberty's most stoic defenders and foes of tyranny are numbered among the religious, but it is also true that this is a relatively recent development. Most of humankind's most brutal and backward institutions, such as slavery, were long zealously supported by the religious, who drew inspiration from their "divinely anointed" books. As Thomas Jefferson, a deist, observed, "In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own." The major religions' censorious inclinations are well established, and continue even today, with some authors paying with their lives for daring to challenge religious orthodoxy. Such practices and beliefs are mirrored in the practices of the 20th century despotisms, which regulated and constrained the lives and thoughts of its citizens to a degree never seen before.

Yes, this hostility is universal throughout history, but the communist despotisms and religion share common reasons. First, their practitioners believe they possess an absolute truth, an inerrant paradigm, opposition to which is inexcusable ([Romans 1:20](#)) or a sign of [mental illness](#). Second, both hold a supremely negative view of human nature - a nature which must be restrained and molded for the greater good. Third, their revered works lack any explicit rational or defense of human liberty, but offer plenty of material to challenge it. Given these attributes, there is thus little wonder why communism and religion share a common heritage of reaction against the march of human freedom.

A third shared trait is *unquestioned obedience from the top*. When the leader has spoken, those below are obligated to follow whatever edicts or commands that were issued. Consultative or deliberative bodies there may be, but they do not set policy or mandate a vision. This is because only the leader is believed to be imbued with the right (often mystical) qualities, enabling him to chart the true path and avoid error. Setbacks or failures are always the fault of subordinates, who are either purposely undermining orders or lack sufficient ability and will. It takes long periods of time before mistakes are rectified, because information flows only from the top down, and because admitting them punctures the aura of infallibility upon which the power of the leader strongly depends. Usually reform comes only after he has passed away or been removed. Dissent is severely limited and punished.

A fourth commonality is the *promise of a perfected existence*. Theists have their heaven; communists have their utopia. Whether achieved in this life or the next, both hold out hope for a future which not just surpasses but transcends the present, mundane world. The utility of this promise is powerful and multi-faceted, spurring true believers to acts of incredible heroism and sacrifice, but also to abject evil,

because no effort is justifiably spared in order to achieve the glory that awaits. The striking feature of the promise is that it is offered completely *on faith*. Besides mythical stories buried in some far distant past, its propagators can point to no evidence that their nirvanas are true. The inability to verify their claims redounds to their benefit, since the conditions for attaining the new existence can be altered at will, much to the profitability of church and/or state.

And what would the carrot be without the stick? Rejection of the gospel truth is an intolerable affront, punishable here and now in some labor or “re-education” camp, or after death in a lake of fire for all eternity. Utopia if you’re with us, hell if you’re not.

The four commonalities above explain why the behavior of the 20th century despotisms closely models that of many religions’. Besides today’s communist regimes, which others are the most conservative and oppressive? Not secular societies, but those ruled in accordance with religious doctrines.

Conclusion

Experience has demonstrated time and time again, when reality and faith diverge, religious believers often alter reality to conform to faith. The desperate claim that atheism produced the 20th century despotisms is another unfortunate example, and cynical in its attempt to divert attention from religion’s own historic crimes, which assuredly *have been* committed in accordance with its creeds. If anything, Stalin, Mao, and Hitler should serve warning to the dangers of religion, which equally seeks to impose a version of its own “unassailable” dogmas on the rest of us.



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