

# WSJ Print Edition

*Communism offers redemption and moral intensity without the restraints of religion.*

## The Gospel According to Karl Marx

### HOUSES OF WORSHIP

*By Robert Orlando*

What if Karl Marx wasn't merely an economist or revolutionary theorist, but an eschatologist—someone who didn't abolish the Christian drama of redemption but relocated it within the realm of humanly achievable history?

The question might seem mad. Eschatology belongs to theology, religion's study of the final destiny of time. And Marx famously dismissed religion as an illusion, calling it the "opium of the people." Yet when his thought is examined carefully, a striking parallel emerges: Marx didn't eliminate redemption. He translated it into political economy.

The traditional Christian story of history unfolds in a recognizable pattern: creation, fall and eventual restoration in heaven. Human life is marked by injustice and suffering, but the ultimate resolution of history arrives through divine action.

Marx absorbed this narrative while rejecting its theological foundations. Capitalism was akin to the fall; class struggles became the engine of history, and revolution the moment of redemption. The proletariat, the working class, was elevated into the historical agent of liberation. In this way, Marx transformed a theological drama into a secular narrative of historical inevitability.

Marx himself insisted that philosophy must undertake the "ruthless critique of everything existing." His critique of capitalism was powerful because it described genuine problems with industrial society. Marx argued that modern economic life had produced alienation—workers estranged from the products of their labor, from one another, and ultimately from themselves. As "The Communist Manifesto" puts it, the history of society is fundamentally "the history of class struggles."

When politics adopts the structure of salvation history, it inherits the moral intensity of religion while losing its restraints. Opponents are no longer merely mistaken but obstacles to history's inevitable future. Compromise begins to resemble betrayal. Marx's revolutionary language often carries an apocalyptic tone. The overthrow of capitalism isn't reform but the decisive turning point of history.

Once politics assumes the role of redemption, the temptation is to justify extraordinary measures in the name of historical necessity. Twentieth-century philosophers recognized this transformation. Alasdair MacIntyre observed that Marxism was one of the few modern systems capable of translating hopes once expressed in religious terms. The promise of liberation remains, but its horizon has shifted from divine action to a historical process that humans can bring about. Marx's revolution wasn't only a political change. It was the secular culmination of redemptive history.

Other thinkers saw similar dangers. Henri de Lubac argued that modern atheistic humanisms often preserve the moral ambitions of religion while stripping away the transcendent dimension that once disciplined those ambitions. When redemption becomes entirely immanent—located within human history rather than beyond it—the political sphere begins to carry expectations it can't fulfill.

The contrast becomes especially clear when placed alongside the thought of St. Paul. Writing to the Philippians, Paul described his former achievements under the law with a blunt Greek word meaning refuse or rubbish. His point was that human systems, however impressive they appear, can't secure redemption. Marx reversed that logic. Where Paul dismissed human structures as incapable of saving humanity, Marx entrusted history itself with precisely that task.

Understanding Marxism in this light helps explain its emotional power. Political programs alone rarely inspire the level of devotion that Marxist movements often generated. Eschatologies do. When people believe they are participating in the final chapter of human liberation, sacrifice becomes meaningful and opposition evil. The 20th century revealed the consequences of this dynamic with unsettling clarity. As the historian Leszek Kołakowski observed, Marxism functioned for many as “the greatest fantasy of our century”—a promise that history itself would bring final justice.

G.K. Chesterton captured the problem: Marx simply replaces one abstraction with another. But abstractions such as “historical inevitability” can’t produce justice on their own, because justice depends on the moral character of the persons who act within those systems.

The deep question for our own moment is whether modern politics can resist the temptation to which Marxists surrender. Every generation is drawn to the hope that history itself will resolve its deepest conflicts. Marx gave that hope its most powerful modern expression by translating theological categories into the language of political economy. But as Eric Voegelin once warned, attempts to “immanentize the eschaton”—to force heaven into history—have repeatedly produced political disasters.

Marx didn’t abolish the Christian structure of redemption. He relocated it within history—and that relocation continues to shape the political imagination of the modern world.

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