

POPE FRANCIS AND THE “RELIGION OF HUMANITY”

Daniel J. Mahoney’s book *The Idol of Our Age* offers a succinct and clear rebuttal to many of the left-leaning, socialist notions of the current pontiff.

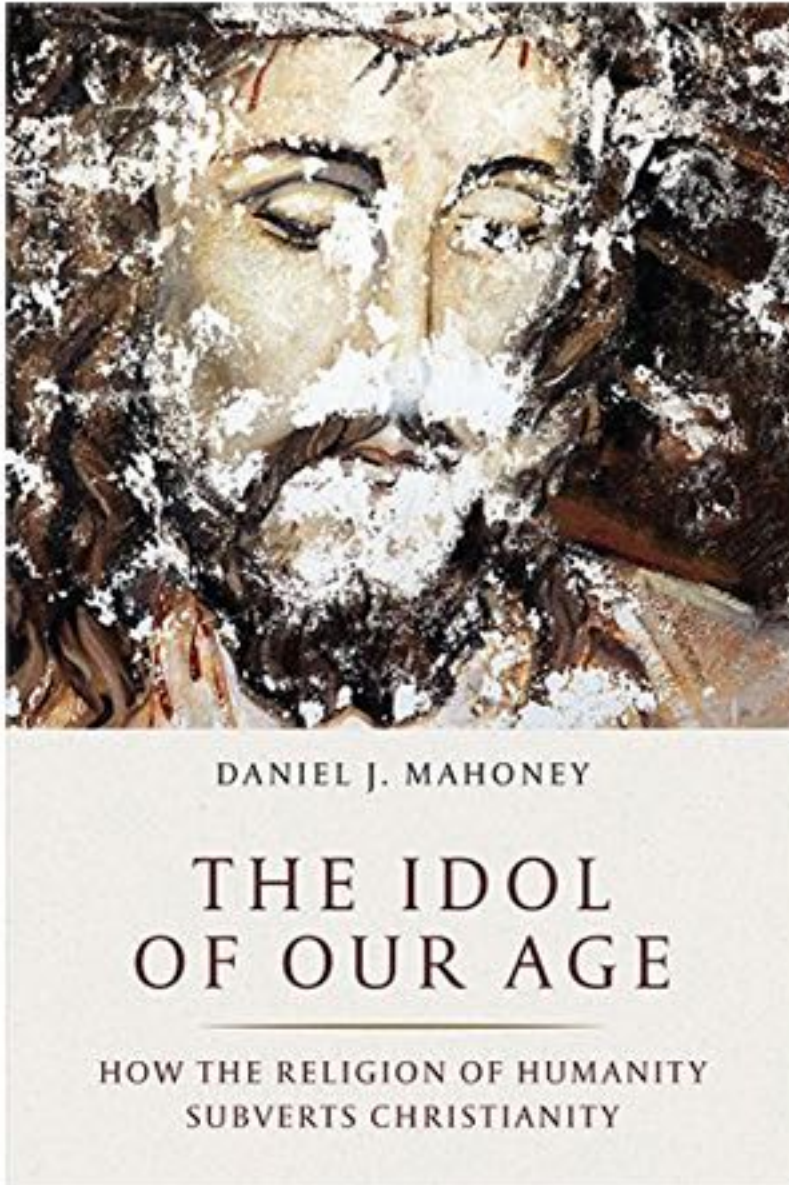
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Pope Francis and former Cuban President Fidel Castro grasp each other's hands at Castro's residence in Havana Sept. 20, 2015. (CNS photo/Alex Castro, AIN handout via Reuters)

As individuals move away from organized religion, they begin to search elsewhere for meaning in their lives. Some turn to relationships, to work, or to politics. In doing so, they become creatures not of God but of society-politics. One then has the choice to either rule or be ruled, and the stakes can be no higher, because for the secular humanist man is the highest being, and so power among men is the highest good. This is a key reason why nearly everything is now political—and increasingly contentious. It is also why people become consumed with political campaigns and the outcomes of elections.



For those who continue to search for meaning in Christianity, the humanitarian impulse to regard man “as the measure of all things” has corrupted the value of much of organized religion, reducing it to an inordinate concern for social justice, radical politics, and an increasingly fanatical egalitarianism.

Daniel J. Mahoney, Philosophy Professor at Assumption College, puts this into perspective in his new book, *The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity* (Encounter Books, 2018), in which he suggests that humanitarians have confused equitable social arrangements with socialism, and moral judgment with utopianism and sentimentality. This has now manifested itself in many ways in the

progressive politics surrounding Pope Francis. The 2013 election of Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio from Argentina was initially welcomed by most Catholics, including progressive media outlets that were quick to describe him as one of their own because of his concern for the plight of the poor. (Pope Francis identifies strongly with the poor and **has often stated**, “My people are poor and I am one of them.”) And, although progressives continue to applaud the many ways in which Pope Francis has denigrated capitalism—excoriating what he claims are the profit motives of those he views as the “greedy” business owners—some have experienced a growing unease about what they view as the pontiff’s slide to socialism.

In the summer of 2015, the *Economist* **published an essay** describing Francis as “The Peronist Pope.” Raised in Argentina, the young Bergoglio was apparently attracted to the political ideology and legacy of former President Juan Domingo Peron and his wife, Eva, although the exact nature of the attraction **is not entirely clear**. The Peronist ideal rejects both capitalism and communism, but views the state as the savior in negotiating conflicts between managers and workers. Rather than looking to social, spiritual or political measures to help the poor, the Peronists look to the state to redistribute existing wealth. Progressives often laud its populist roots, citing President Peron’s support of universal social security, free health care, and free higher education. Soviet-style low income housing projects were created for “workers” and employers were forced to provide paid vacations for all employees. Although Peron grew to mistrust the Catholic priesthood, he claimed that his economic system was the “true embodiment of Catholic social teaching.” But, by 1954, Peronism’s anti-clericalism resulted in state control over the churches, denunciations of clergy, and confiscation of Catholic schools and Church property.

During a visit to Bolivia in July, 2015, Pope Francis publicly and graciously accepted a gift of a crucifix shaped in the form of a Marxist hammer and sickle from Bolivia’s Marxist President Evo Morales. Ignoring the murderous history symbolized by the hammer and sickle, Pope Francis told those on the plane ride back to Rome that “I understand this work,” and “for me it wasn’t an offense.” In Paraguay, he denigrated capitalism—telling a large gathering “not to yield to an economic model which is idolatrous, which needs to sacrifice human lives on the altar of money and profit.” And, during the welcoming ceremony at Jose Marti International Airport in Havana on September 19, 2015, when Pope Francis visited the Communist island, he spoke of his “sentiments of particular respect” for Fidel Castro, a totalitarian tyrant who subjugated the people of Cuba for more than fifty years, and who viciously persecuted the Catholic Church.

Pope Francis said nothing about the persecution and imprisonment of Catholic dissidents in Cuba—ignoring the pleas of the parents of those imprisoned.

Echoing these concerns about the inability of the current pontiff to criticize dictators such as Castro and Peron, Mahoney suggests in *The Idol of Our Age* that “Pope Francis seems to be rather indulgent towards despotic regimes that speak in the name of the poor.” Critical of the fact that during his visit to Cuba, Pope Francis stayed silent about the persecution of mainly Catholic dissidents in Havana, Mahoney states, “The poor need political liberty too, and the opportunities that come with private property and lawfully regulated markets.” It is all the more striking that Pope Francis never reiterates the Church’s defense of private property, a central concern of Catholic social teaching going back to Pope Leo XII’s encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Mahoney writes that Pope Francis “almost always identifies markets with greed, inequality, economic imperialism and environmental degradation. Moreover, he is silent about the horrendous environmental devastation that accompanied and characterized totalitarian socialist systems in the twentieth century.”²

Most recently, Pope Francis lauded the “positive” relationships he has with the leaders of Communist China. In **an interview** with a journalist in May, 2019, Pope Francis said that “My dream is China... Relations with China are good, very good.” Refusing to acknowledge concerns about the marginalized and imprisoned Catholics—including priests and bishops—in the underground church in China, Pope Francis claimed that the Sino-Vatican agreement he signed in September, 2018, with representatives of the Communist government in China “united” Catholics in the Communist country. In the agreement, Pope Francis regularized the status of seven of China’s bishops who had been ordained by the Communist government, marking the first time since the 1950s that all the Catholic bishops in China were in “full communion” with the pope.

Unfortunately, the agreement has not ended the arrest and imprisonment of priests and bishops, and the continued persecution of Catholics. Yet, Pope Francis continues to claim that China is united now, **telling a journalist** that: “The other day two Chinese bishops came to me, one who came from the underground church and the other from the patriotic church, already recognized as brothers... They know that they must be good patriots and that they must take care of the Catholic flock.” During the previous month, Chinese government officials detained Fr. Peter Zhang Guanjun, an underground priest, after Palm Sunday Mass. Fr. Guanjun was the third priest to be detained by the Communist government

during April, 2019. On June 8, 2019, Msgr. Stefano Li Side, the underground bishop of Tianjin **died in captivity**. The bishop had refused to be a part of the Communist-sanctioned Church and had been exiled to a mountain village under house arrest, along with a coadjutor underground bishop, Msgr. Melchiorre Shi Hongzhen, 92, who remains under house arrest by the Communist government.

While it is clear that his intentions are for unification, Pope Francis has had little to say about the persecution of priests and bishops in China and the brutal history of the formation of the government-created Patriotic Catholic Association to control the Catholic Church under Communist dictator Mao Zedong back in the 1950s. Following the formation of the Patriotic Association Church, Bishop Li was arrested in 1958 and sentenced to forced labor camps. Although he was released in 1962, he was again arrested and imprisoned in 1963 until 1980—again assigned to forced labor camps.

Pope Francis has been reluctant to criticize Communist dictators. After decades in the shadows of the Catholic Church, liberation theology has gained strength under the current leadership. George Neumayr's book, *The Political Pope* points out that in one of his first major interviews, Pope Francis said that liberation theologians have a "high concept of humanity." A few months after he became pope on March 13, 2013, Pope Francis welcomed the founding father of liberation theology, the Peruvian priest Gustavo Gutierrez to the Vatican as an honored guest. Gutierrez had been a marginalized figure under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI after making a Marxist appeal for "effective participation in the struggle which the exploited classes have undertaken against their oppressors."³ In 2015, Pope Francis elevated Leonardo Boff, a liberation theologian from Brazil, who had been silenced by Pope John Paul II's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, by inviting Boff to serve as an advisor for *Laudato Si*, his 2015 papal encyclical on climate change. Pope Francis also reinstated the priestly faculties of Miguel d'Escoto Brockman, who had been suspended because of his participation in Nicaragua's Marxist revolutionary government. d'Escoto now lobbies for the Libyans, remains a member of the Sandinista National Liberation Front, and continues to serve as an adviser to Daniel Ortega, the left-wing Nicaraguan guerrilla leader, member of the Sandinista junta that took power in 1979, and three-term president of Nicaragua.

Pope Francis's embrace of elements of liberation theology is in contrast to his papal predecessors. Both Popes St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI warned of the dangers of a Church that was "born of the

people.” In fact, Pope St. John Paul II gave a stern rebuke to leading liberation theologians in 1983, publishing a letter to the Nicaraguan bishops denouncing the “people’s church.” In a speech that was **reported on the pages** of the *New York Times* on March 5, 1983, the pontiff predicted that “The Church born of the people is a new invention that is both absurd and of perilous character...only with difficulty, could it avoid being infiltrated by strangely ideological connotations. In 1984, then-Cardinal Ratzinger offered *An Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation* in which he warned about the dangers of the “diverse theological positions,” and “badly defined doctrinal frontiers” of this movement.

Mahoney, in **his recent interview** with CWR, insisted that Pope Francis, in contrast to his two predecessors, “learned nothing, or next to nothing, from humanity’s experience with ideological tyranny in the twentieth century.” Mahoney further stated:

He seems to have admired Fidel Castro, was slow to face the truth about the Maduro regime in Venezuela, and never emphasizes or repeats the Church’s condemnation of socialism and totalitarian collectivism. He seems to have confidence that the atheistic Communist Party of China can more or less run the Catholic Church in that still authoritarian country.

His lack of realism in that regard is stunning. He recently told a French interviewer that “one always wins with peace” and that “no war is just.” This is rank utopianism, devoid of any sense that charity demands the protection of the innocent against unjust aggression. It simply ignores the long-standing teaching of the Church on matters of war and peace. Do Bergoglio’s whims trump the wisdom of St. Paul, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas? Or do Christians believe in historicism after all, with truth evolving in each age? Francis’s view of decent, liberal societies with free markets and a social safety network, are remarkably summary, worthy of an Argentinian Peronist.

Humanitarians confuse equitable social arrangements with socialism. It is possible that Pope Francis believes that Christianity can purify the Marxist elements of socialist thought. Sadly, he is wrong, for the “religion of humanity”—which so often presents itself under a veneer of sentimental

appeal—is ideological opposed, at the core, to the authentic anthropology and traditional philosophical principles of the Catholic Church.

Endnotes:

- 1** Daniel J. Mahoney. *The Idol of Our Age: How the Religion of Humanity Subverts Christianity*. New York: Encounter Books. 2019. p 99.
- 2** Mahoney. *The Idol of Our Age*, 98.
- 3** George Neumayr. *The Political Pope*. New York: Center Street. 2018. p 4.