

### **Communism, Spirituality, and the Question of Atheism: A Philosophical Reflection**

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#### **Abstract**

Communism and spirituality are often presented as opposing forces in modern political and philosophical debates. Many people associate communism with atheism because several communist governments and leaders historically promoted secularism and rejected organized religion. However, communism as an economic and political theory does not necessarily require atheism. Spirituality concerns the inner life, morality, meaning, compassion, and the relationship between humanity and the transcendent, while communism primarily addresses social equality, collective ownership, and economic justice. This monograph examines the relationship between communism and spirituality by analyzing Marxist thought, the historical development of atheist communist movements, and examples of spiritual or religious socialism across the world. It argues that atheism emerged more from political interpretations of communism than from the unavoidable essence of communist philosophy itself. The study further explores how some communist thinkers treated humanity as the highest value, leading critics to claim that “people became their god.” Ultimately, spirituality and communism represent different pathways that may conflict in some contexts yet coexist in others.

#### **Keywords**

*Communism, Spirituality, Atheism, Marxism, Religion, Socialism, Humanism, Liberation Theology, Buddhist Socialism, Secularism*

#### **Introduction**

The relationship between communism and religion has remained controversial throughout modern history. Many people associate communism with atheism because several communist governments openly opposed religion and promoted secular ideologies. However, communism itself is primarily a political and economic theory concerned with class struggle, equality, and collective ownership rather than a direct doctrine about God or spirituality (Stromberg, 1979).

Spirituality, on the other hand, concerns moral consciousness, inner peace, compassion, and the search for meaning. These dimensions differ from political ideology. While some communist movements rejected religion, spirituality and communism are not necessarily identical or mutually exclusive pathways. According to Brentlinger (2000), socialism has often been incorrectly portrayed as entirely anti-religious, despite historical examples of cooperation between spiritual traditions and socialist movements.

This monograph argues that atheism developed more from historical interpretations of communism than from the unavoidable nature of communist philosophy itself. Furthermore, spiritual values such as justice, compassion, and equality may coexist with socialist ideals.

## **Objectives**

The present monograph aims to examine the philosophical relationship between communism, spirituality, and atheism from both theoretical and historical perspectives. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the philosophical foundations of Marxism, particularly dialectical materialism, and its implications for the concept of God and religion.
2. Distinguish between communism as an economic and political philosophy and spirituality as a moral and existential dimension of human life.
3. Analyze the historical development of atheism within Marxist-Leninist political systems and evaluate whether atheism is an essential characteristic of communism or a product of specific historical interpretations.
4. Explore examples of religious socialism, liberation theology, and Buddhist socialism to understand how spiritual traditions have interacted with socialist ideals.
5. Critically evaluate the common assumption that all communists are atheists and examine the diversity of philosophical and religious beliefs among individuals associated with socialist and communist movements.
6. Present a balanced philosophical reflection on the possibility of coexistence between commitments to social equality and personal spirituality.

## **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative philosophical and historical research design based on documentary analysis and comparative philosophical interpretation. Rather than collecting empirical data, the research critically examines the relationship between communism, spirituality, and atheism through the analysis of primary philosophical texts and relevant secondary scholarship. The objective is to distinguish the philosophical foundations of Marxism from the historical practices of communist states and from the personal religious or spiritual beliefs of individuals who identify with socialist or communist ideals.

The primary sources consist of selected writings by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Vladimir I. Lenin, including *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, *The German Ideology*, *Capital*, *Anti-Dühring*, *Dialectics of Nature*, *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*, and *Socialism and Religion*. These texts were selected because they represent the foundational philosophical formulations of historical materialism, dialectical materialism, and Marxist perspectives on religion. Direct engagement with these works enables the study to evaluate

whether atheism is an essential component of Marxist philosophy or whether later political interpretations extended Marx's original arguments.

Secondary sources were selected according to three criteria: (1) publication in peer-reviewed journals or by reputable academic publishers; (2) direct relevance to Marxism, religion, spirituality, liberation theology, or religious socialism; and (3) contribution to contrasting scholarly interpretations of the relationship between religion and socialist thought. Particular attention is given to the works of Brentlinger (2000), Rehmann and Kahl (2013), Geoghegan (2004), Pospelovsky (1987), Smolkin-Rothrock (2010), Engineer (1989), Elmore (2016), Shields (2022), and other scholars who examine the historical and philosophical interaction between Marxism and religion.

The study employs a comparative philosophical framework to analyse three distinct levels of inquiry: (i) classical Marxist philosophy as articulated by Marx, Engels, and Lenin; (ii) the historical implementation of Marxist-Leninist ideology in twentieth-century communist states; and (iii) religious and spiritual movements that have adopted socialist principles, including liberation theology and Buddhist socialism. Comparing these three levels allows the study to determine whether atheism arises from the philosophical premises of Marxism itself or from particular political and historical applications.

Interpretation of the literature follows a critical-hermeneutic approach, in which philosophical arguments are examined within their historical and intellectual contexts. Where competing interpretations exist, priority is given to arguments supported by direct evidence from primary texts, while secondary sources are used to contextualise, compare, and critically evaluate alternative perspectives. Divergent scholarly positions are presented before the study advances its own interpretation, ensuring that conclusions are based on comparative analysis rather than assertion.

To maintain analytical clarity, the paper distinguishes between scholarly analysis and personal philosophical reflection. All analytical sections are grounded in primary texts and peer-reviewed academic literature. The section entitled "My Personal Thought" is presented separately as the author's own philosophical interpretation and is not intended as empirical evidence or as a substitute for scholarly analysis. This separation enables readers to distinguish evidence-based arguments from the author's reflective conclusions.

Overall, this methodology provides a systematic framework for examining the relationship between communism, spirituality, and atheism by integrating textual analysis, historical contextualisation, comparative philosophical reasoning, and critical evaluation of competing interpretations. The approach is intended to produce a balanced and academically rigorous assessment of whether atheism is an intrinsic feature of Marxist philosophy or a contingent characteristic of particular historical and political developments.

## Existing Literature Review

| Author(s)               | Focus of Study              | Main Contribution                                                                      |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Stromberg (1979)        | Marxism and religion        | Explains the philosophical relationship between Marxism and religion.                  |
| Geoghegan (2004)        | Marx's critique of religion | Discusses religion as the "opium of the people" and the ethical dimensions of Marxism. |
| Marx (2001)             | Marxist philosophy          | Presents communism as a socio-economic theory centred on class relations.              |
| Pospelovsky (1987)      | Soviet atheism              | Examines the development of Marxist-Leninist atheism and anti-religious policies.      |
| Thrower (1980)          | Scientific atheism          | Describes the institutional promotion of atheism in the USSR.                          |
| Smolkin-Rothrock (2010) | Soviet secularism           | Explains how Soviet society developed secular rituals to replace religion.             |
| Buchenau (2015)         | Socialist secularism        | Demonstrates the diversity of secular models within socialist states.                  |
| Brentlinger (2000)      | Marxism and spirituality    | Argues that socialism has often been misunderstood as entirely anti-religious.         |
| Rehmann & Kahl (2013)   | Spirituality and Marxism    | Explores the intersection of religion, spirituality, and the commons.                  |
| Engineer (1989)         | Religion and liberation     | Shows how religion can support social justice movements.                               |
| Elmore (2016)           | Liberation theology         | Examines religion, capitalism, and Marxist critical pedagogy.                          |
| Shields (2022)          | Buddhist socialism          | Explains the compatibility of Buddhist ethics and socialist thought.                   |
| Waistell (2014)         | Buddhist communism          | Discusses shared ethical concerns between Buddhism and communism.                      |

| Author(s)       | Focus of Study       | Main Contribution                                         |
|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| Rothbard (1990) | Humanism and Marxism | Critiques Marxism as functioning like a secular religion. |

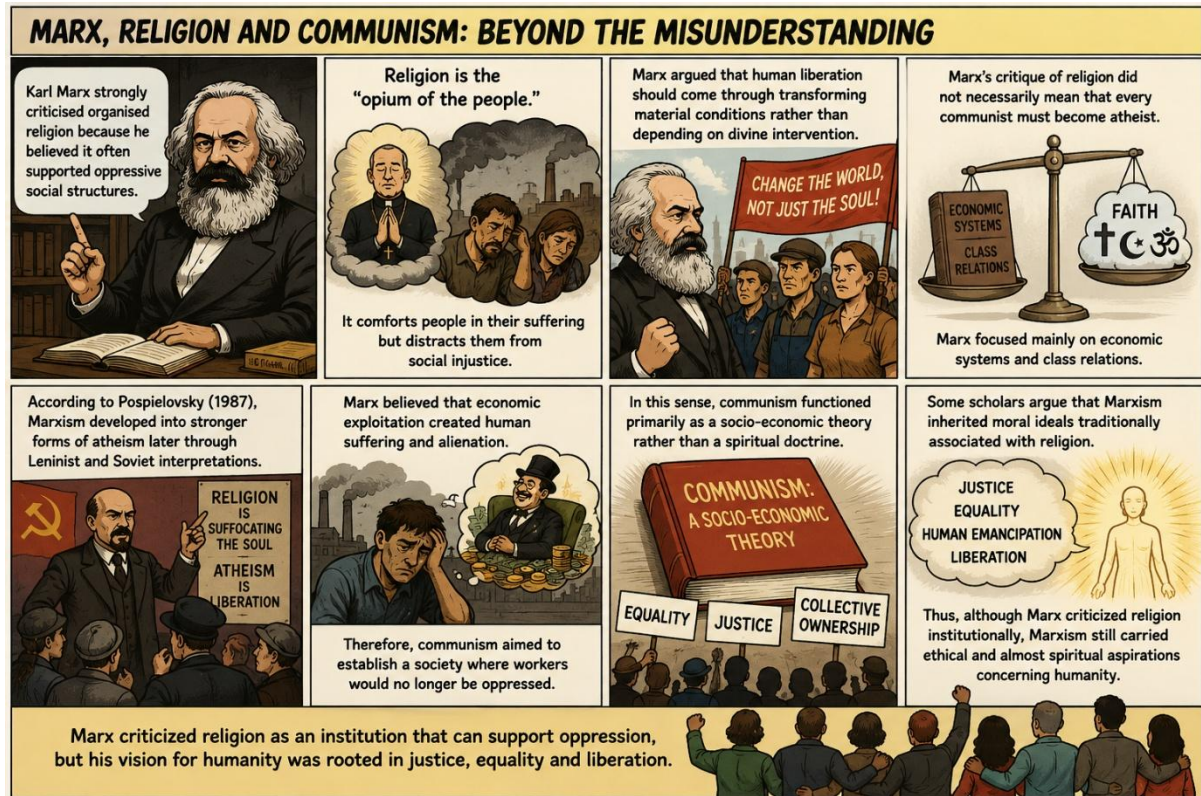
## Marxism and the Critique of Religion

Karl Marx strongly criticised organised religion because he believed it often supported oppressive social structures. His famous statement that religion is the “opium of the people” suggested that religion comforted suffering individuals while distracting them from social injustice (Geoghegan, 2004). Marx argued that human liberation should come through transforming material conditions rather than depending on divine intervention.

Nevertheless, Marx’s critique of religion did not necessarily mean that every communist must become atheist. Marx focused mainly on economic systems and class relations. As Pospelovsky (1987) explains, Marxism developed into stronger forms of atheism later through Leninist and Soviet interpretations.

Marx believed that economic exploitation created human suffering and alienation. Therefore, communism aimed to establish a society where workers would no longer be oppressed. In this sense, communism functioned primarily as a socio-economic theory rather than a spiritual doctrine (Marx, 2001).

Some scholars argue that Marxism inherited moral ideals traditionally associated with religion. Geoghegan (2004) notes that Marxist thought contains visions of justice, equality, and human emancipation that resemble religious hopes for salvation and liberation. Thus, although Marx criticized religion institutionally, Marxism still carried ethical and almost spiritual aspirations concerning humanity.



*Comic 1. Marx, Religion and Communism (Made using Canva AI)*

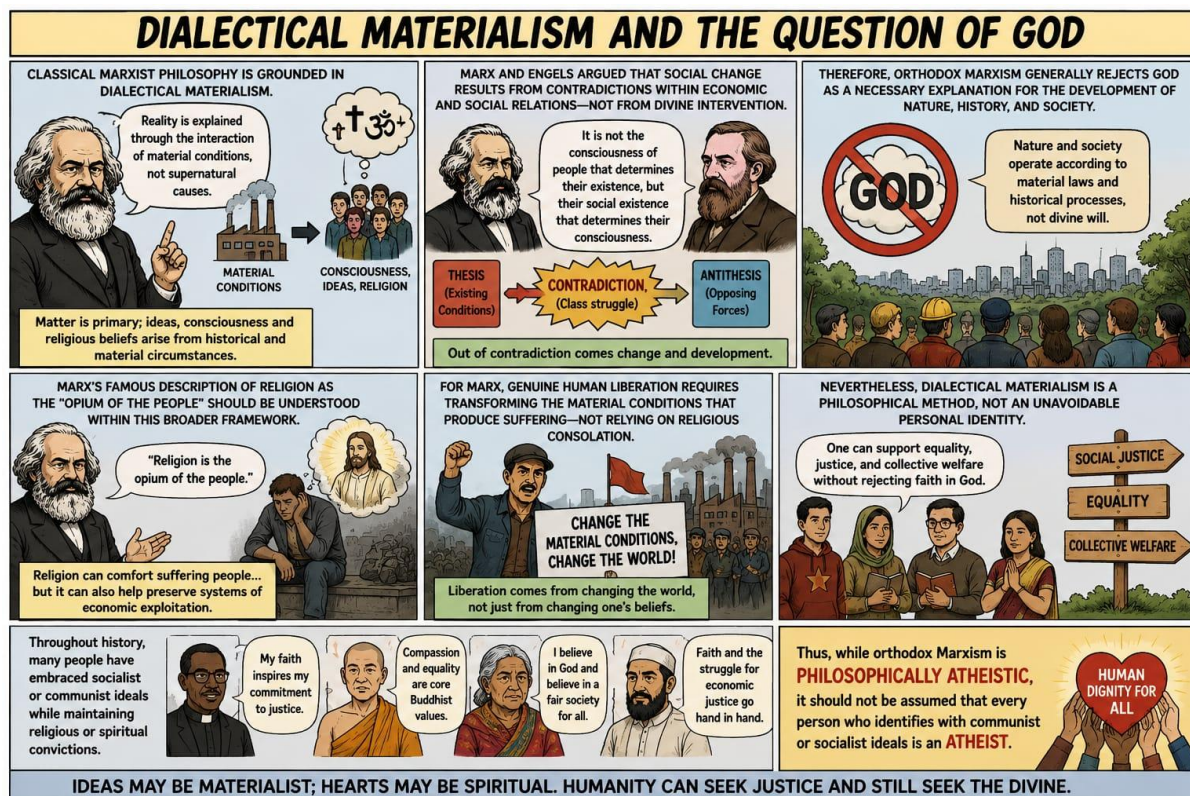
**Significance.** The figure visually summarizes Marx's critique of religion and the distinction between communism as a socio-economic philosophy and atheism as a historical and political interpretation.

## Dialectical Materialism and the Question of God

Classical Marxist philosophy is grounded in dialectical materialism, a philosophical framework that explains reality through the interaction of material conditions rather than supernatural causes. Within this framework, matter is regarded as primary, while consciousness, ideas, and religious beliefs arise from historical and material circumstances. Marx and Engels argued that social change results from contradictions within economic and social relations rather than from divine intervention. Consequently, orthodox Marxism generally rejects God as a necessary explanation for the development of nature, history, and society.

Marx's famous description of religion as the "opium of the people" should therefore be understood within this broader philosophical framework. He viewed religion not merely as a set of beliefs but as a social institution that could comfort suffering while simultaneously helping to preserve systems of economic exploitation. For Marx, genuine human liberation required transforming the material conditions that produced suffering rather than relying upon religious consolation.

Nevertheless, dialectical materialism is a philosophical method rather than an unavoidable personal identity. Acceptance of socialist ideals concerning equality, collective welfare, or economic justice does not necessarily require every individual to reject belief in God. Throughout history, many people have adopted socialist or communist economic principles while maintaining religious or spiritual convictions. Thus, while orthodox Marxism is philosophically atheistic, it should not automatically be assumed that every person who identifies with communist or socialist ideals is an atheist.



**Comic 2.** *Dialectical Materialism & the question of God (Made using canva AI)*

**Significance.** *The figure illustrates the relationship between dialectical materialism, historical change, and the philosophical debate over the role of religion, complementing the textual analysis presented in this section.*

## Communist Governments and the Rise of Atheism

Although communism itself does not automatically require atheism, many communist governments adopted anti-religious policies. Lenin and later Soviet leaders considered religion a barrier to revolutionary consciousness. Religious institutions were viewed as allies of monarchy, capitalism, and social inequality (Smolkin-Rothrock, 2010).

The Soviet Union promoted “scientific atheism” as part of state ideology. Citizens were encouraged to replace religious faith with loyalty to socialist society and the Communist Party.

Churches were closed, religious education was restricted, and atheism became part of public education (Pospelovsky, 1987).

This historical experience shaped the global perception that communism equals atheism. Similar patterns appeared in Maoist China, Albania, and other Marxist-Leninist states. According to Thrower (1980), communist governments often feared religion because it represented an independent source of authority outside state control.

However, these political applications should not be confused with the entire philosophy of communism itself. Communist governments often used atheism as a political instrument to strengthen ideological unity. Therefore, hostility toward religion emerged partly from political circumstances rather than solely from economic theory (Buchenau, 2015).

Critics argue that communist systems sometimes replaced God with the collective state or humanity itself. In such systems, loyalty to the party and revolutionary ideology became almost sacred. This explains why some people claim that “people became their god” under atheistic communism.

### **Spirituality Beyond Religion**

Spirituality is broader than organized religion. A person may seek truth, compassion, justice, and moral transformation without belonging to a formal religious institution. Rehmann and Kahl (2013) argue that spirituality can exist within movements for social justice and communal welfare.

Some socialist ideals resemble spiritual ethics. Both spirituality and socialism may criticize greed, selfishness, and exploitation. Both often emphasize human dignity, cooperation, and care for the poor. Brentlinger (2000) explains that revolutionary movements sometimes express moral passion similar to religious commitment.

Moreover, spirituality concerns inner liberation, while communism concerns social liberation. One seeks transformation of the individual soul or consciousness, while the other seeks transformation of economic structures. These goals may differ, yet they are not always contradictory.

Human beings naturally search for meaning beyond material existence. Even atheistic societies cannot entirely eliminate spiritual questions concerning morality, suffering, purpose, and hope. Smolkin-Rothrock (2010) observes that Soviet atheism attempted to create secular rituals because people continued to seek symbolic and emotional meaning traditionally provided by religion.

Thus, spirituality may survive even within secular or socialist societies.

## **Religious Socialism and Liberation Theology**

History provides many examples where spirituality and socialist ideals worked together. Liberation theology in Latin America combined Christian teachings with struggles against poverty and oppression. Priests and theologians argued that faith requires defending the poor and resisting exploitation (Elmore, 2016).

Similarly, Islamic scholars, Buddhist reformers, and Hindu activists have sometimes supported socialist principles. Engineer (1989) argued that religion can inspire liberation movements rather than merely support political power.

Buddhist socialism is one notable example. Waistell (2014) explains that Buddhist teachings against greed and attachment share similarities with Marxist criticism of capitalism. Buddhism encourages compassion, equality, and concern for collective well-being, values that may align with socialist ethics.

In China and Japan, some Buddhist intellectuals attempted to harmonize Buddhism with socialism during the early twentieth century. Shields (2022) demonstrates that Buddhist socialism developed as an effort to combine spiritual discipline with social equality.

These examples challenge the assumption that communism and spirituality are naturally hostile toward one another. Instead, they suggest that economic justice and spiritual values may coexist under certain interpretations.

## **Humanism and the Idea that “People Become God”**

One criticism of atheistic communism is that it replaces divine authority with human authority. Communist ideology often emphasized human reason, collective action, and revolutionary power. In some communist states, political leaders became objects of intense devotion resembling religious worship.

Rothbard (1990) described Marxism as functioning almost like a secular religion because it offered visions of historical destiny and ultimate human liberation. Similarly, critics argue that communist ideology sometimes transformed political leaders into symbolic figures comparable to sacred authorities.

This development reflects secular humanism, which places humanity rather than God at the center of moral and social life. Supporters argue that morality can emerge from human solidarity and rational ethics without dependence on religion. Opponents, however, fear that removing transcendent moral authority may lead to authoritarianism.

The cults surrounding Stalin and Mao illustrate how political systems sometimes replaced religious reverence with ideological loyalty. Consequently, critics maintain that atheistic communism occasionally elevated humanity itself into a substitute for God.

Nevertheless, not all secular societies become oppressive. Ethical principles such as compassion, justice, and equality may still exist without formal religious belief.

### **Can Communism and Spirituality Coexist?**

The coexistence of communism and spirituality depends largely on interpretation. If communism is defined as militant atheism, conflict with spirituality becomes likely. However, if communism is understood mainly as an economic system seeking equality and social justice, then spiritual individuals may participate within it.

Many spiritual traditions criticize greed and exploitation. Similarly, socialism criticizes economic inequality and concentration of wealth. Rehmann and Kahl (2013) suggest that both spiritual ethics and socialist thought may cooperate in struggles against injustice.

History demonstrates examples of both conflict and harmony. Communist governments frequently restricted religion, yet spiritual socialist movements also emerged across the world. Therefore, spirituality and communism cannot be understood as permanently opposed realities.

Spirituality seeks moral and inner transformation, while communism seeks social and economic transformation. Although their methods differ, both may express concern for human dignity and collective well-being.

### **My Personal Thought**

In my personal view, communism and spirituality are distinct concepts and should not be regarded as identical or inherently incompatible. Classical Marxist philosophy is rooted in dialectical materialism, which interprets reality through material conditions, historical development, and social contradictions rather than through supernatural or divine causes. Within this philosophical framework, God is not considered necessary for explaining the world, and religion is often viewed as a historical and social phenomenon rather than a divine truth. I acknowledge this as a defining feature of orthodox Marxist thought.

However, I do not believe that this philosophical position should be applied indiscriminately to every individual who identifies with communist or socialist ideals. Communism, as a political and economic philosophy, is primarily concerned with questions of equality, collective ownership, and social justice, whereas spirituality addresses the search for meaning, morality, conscience, and one's relationship with the Divine or the transcendent. These represent different dimensions of human life and need not always stand in opposition.

Although many twentieth-century communist governments officially promoted atheism and adopted Marxist-Leninist interpretations that discouraged or suppressed religious belief, I do not believe that this historical experience proves that every communist rejects God. Individuals may support socialist or communist principles as approaches to economic and social organization while maintaining sincere faith in God or embracing a spiritual worldview. Political ideology does not necessarily determine personal belief. This perspective is consistent with broader discussions of human behaviour and leadership, which suggest that individual

values, ethical commitments, and decision-making cannot be fully explained by ideological or organizational affiliation alone (Pal, 2022). This distinction is consistent with my broader understanding that political ideologies evolve through historical and institutional practice rather than remaining fixed philosophical systems. As I have argued in one of my articles (Pal, 2026), the decline of ideological consistency in contemporary democracy demonstrates that political labels alone cannot adequately explain the beliefs, values, or moral commitments of individuals. Consequently, neither communism nor any other political ideology should be treated as an absolute indicator of personal spirituality or religious conviction.

Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the philosophical foundations of Marxism, the policies of communist states, and the diverse convictions of individual human beings. Equating all communists with atheists oversimplifies a far more complex intellectual and historical reality. In my understanding, dialectical materialism offers one method of interpreting society and history, while spirituality addresses questions that extend beyond material analysis. For this reason, I believe that the relationship between communism and spirituality should be examined with nuance rather than reduced to the assumption that one necessarily excludes the other.

## Conclusion

Communism does not automatically mean atheism, even though many communist governments historically promoted anti-religious ideologies. Spirituality and communism belong to different dimensions of human life. Spirituality addresses meaning, morality, and transcendence, while communism focuses primarily on economic equality and collective organization.

The historical connection between communism and atheism developed mainly through Marxist-Leninist political systems that viewed religion as a threat to revolutionary authority. However, liberation theology, Buddhist socialism, and other spiritual socialist movements demonstrate that faith and socialist ideals can coexist.

The criticism that “people became their god” reflects concerns about secular humanism and political absolutism in certain communist states. Nevertheless, ethical values such as compassion, justice, and solidarity may emerge from both spiritual and secular traditions.

Ultimately, spirituality and communism are different pathways, but they are not necessarily permanent enemies. Their relationship depends on how human beings interpret freedom, morality, justice, and the meaning of human existence.

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