

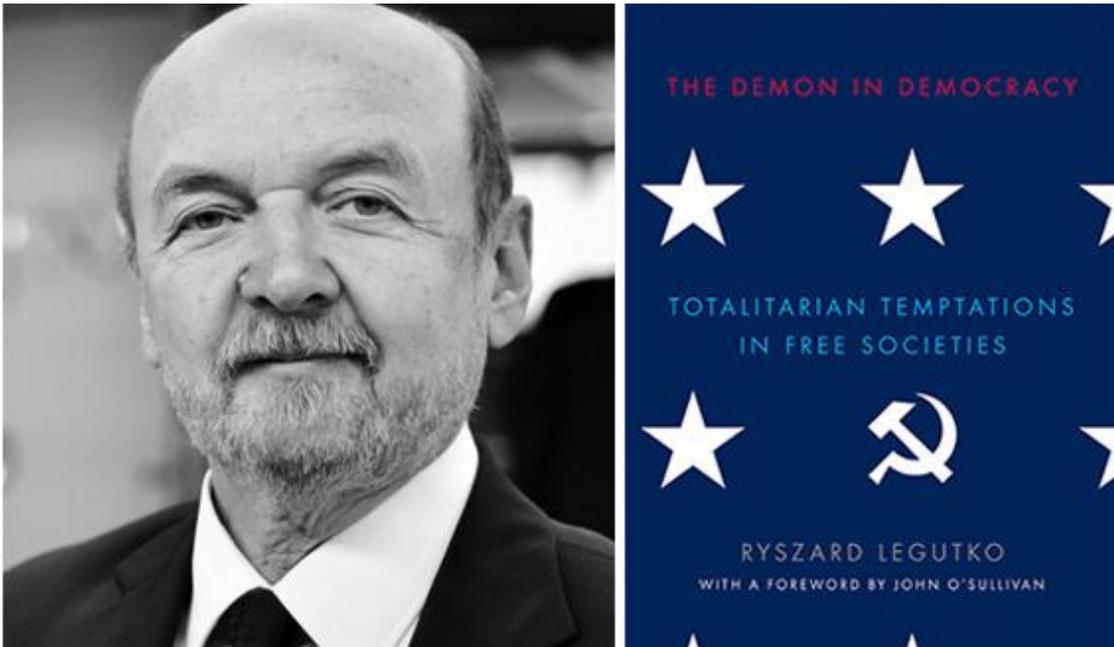
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## IS LIBERAL DEMOCRACY CLOSER TO COMMUNISM OR CATHOLICISM?

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In his bold book "The Demon in Democracy", the Polish philosopher and longtime dissident Ryszard Legutko explains how democracies can quickly turn to totalitarianism.

Jerry Salyer



Polish philosopher and former politician Ryszard Legutko is the author of "The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies", published by Encounter Books (Photos: [www.encounterbooks.com](http://www.encounterbooks.com))

While dialogue with non-Catholics, non-Christians, or even anti-Christians may sometimes be perfectly appropriate, Ryszard Legutko is quite right, in *The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies*, to highlight the fine line which divides Catholics who are open to civil debate from those who act as useful idiots for the Left. In particular, Legutko—a professor of philosophy who held various high-ranking positions in the Polish government—describes at length the problems which beset Catholic attempts to establish dialogue with the establishment of Communist Poland. When viewed in retrospect this naïve effort to win over the Communists “is not an uplifting spectacle,” Legutko reflects soberly, “and reveals an essential asymmetry between the two sides”:

One [side] had to make serious concessions to accommodate itself to the communist reality. The other conceded nothing, promised nothing, and treated its opponents patronizingly. The Catholics' concessions were the following: *they spoke highly of socialism as both theory and practice and distanced themselves from those bad Catholics who did not appreciate the benefits and virtues of the new regime.* They postulated that because Catholicism had much in common with socialism, the Church should be more listened to and its presence more recognized in the socialist society. *The Marxists, in turn, made no concessions at all.* They noted with satisfaction the fact that progressive Catholics finally came to accept socialism, although they should have done it sooner, and that they came to denounce the bad Catholics, although they should have done it more forcefully. To the Catholics' postulate the Marxists responded that of course the Catholics could find their place in the process of building socialism, but they must be aware that socialism had the higher value and *that because the historical record of the Church was ugly, they should try harder than others to earn the trust of the socialist community.* [emphasis added]

Legutko argues that even if we admit that liberal democracy is less brutal than communism, the lessons of Communist Poland are nonetheless extremely relevant today. Like their Communist cousins, liberal democrats purge religion from culture, place totalitarian restrictions on thought and speech, and promote the revolutionary subversion of traditional institutions.

If we take the above quotation from Legutko's book and change terms like *communist* to *egalitarian*, *Marxist* to *liberal*, and *socialism* to *democracy*, we arrive at a remarkably accurate description of the “dialogue” now occurring between secular progressives and conciliatory Catholics in America. Liberals are always only one concession away from warming up to the Church and flocking to the baptismal font—or at least so some Catholic scholars and ecclesial authorities would have us believe. In reality, exaggerating the common ground Church teaching shares with the liberal ideology of human rights has accomplished remarkably little, except perhaps to indelibly stamp upon the plain man's mind the impression that Catholic faith equals globalism plus sacraments. When only one of the two parties takes the other seriously, dialogue devolves into little more than an elaborate ritual of submission.

And as time passes, the demands made upon those Catholics who have submitted to liberalism grow ever more extravagant:

In order for the Church to be praised, or even to be spared the heaviest blows, it is no longer enough to make the sacral architecture less hierarchical, and more democratic, or have the priest face the faithful during mass, or to consider the abolition of celibacy. Nowadays one

must go much further: prohibit the condemnation of anything other than what the liberal-democratic orthodoxy mandates to condemn, and decree to praise everything that this orthodoxy mandates to praise.

Per the new democratic elite, “sexism,” “homophobia,” and “nativism” are the three deadly sins. Meanwhile greed, lust, and malice are virtues, provided they can be justified within the context of progressive politics.

Legutko advises those who would resist current trends to consider the strategy of the faithful Polish Primate Stefan Wyszyński, a churchman who “did not trust the intellectuals, and in fact had never trusted them.” Wyszyński opted “to make the Catholicism of the people—the folk Catholicism, so to speak—he stronghold of the Catholic faith,” Legutko notes. This decision

had far-reaching and generally positive effects: by relying on rural religiosity the Church managed to preserve a large area of social practices and religious traditions that was not accessible to the communist ideology. In countries where this type of folk Christianity did not exist or was considerably weaker, the communist system managed to wreak more havoc and penetrated deeper into the social fabric.

Legutko’s account of Wyszyński only reinforces my own longstanding conviction that American Catholicism accords too little weight to the collective experience embodied in small towns and farming communities, and too much to an intelligentsia and bureaucracy sequestered within metropolitan bubbles like D.C., New York, Boston, and Dallas. As Marx himself acknowledged with his sneer at “the idiocy of rural life,” country folk tend to be conservative, and so are wont to resist political pressure to reinterpret the Faith in terms of equality or diversity or some other chic new god-term. By contrast, Catholic intellectuals have consistently proven themselves extremely susceptible to fashion and the allure of power, seeking (as Legutko puts it) “acceptance of Catholicism not as Catholics but as a group whose creed does not threaten liberal democracy and can even—once they present their case with sufficient skill and credibility—be considered as supportive of it.”

Legutko’s treatment of religion would by itself make this book well worth the while, but let the reader note that the former anticommunist dissident also dwells fruitfully and at length upon other fundamental dimensions of liberal modernity including politics, utopia, and history. In the chapter entitled “Ideology,” Legutko describes how various fanatical ideologies are the inevitable consequence of egalitarianism:

Because *egalitarianism weakens communities* and thus deprives men of an identity-giving habitat, it creates a vacuum around them. Hence a desire exists for a new identity, this time modern and in line with the spirit of militant egalitarianism. The ideologies fulfill this role perfectly. They organize people’s consciousness by providing them with the meaning of life, an individual and collective purpose, an inspiration for further endeavors, and a sense of belonging. With the emergence of ideology the problem of a lonely individual in an egalitarian society no longer exists: feminism makes all women sisters; all homosexuals become brothers in struggle; all environmentalists become a part of an international green movement; all advocates of tolerance join the ranks of a universal antifascist crusade, and so on. [emphasis added]

Having shattered religious traditions and undermined cultural integrity, the liberal revolution set into motion what conservative scholar Robert Nisbet famously called the “quest for community.” Lost, frantic, restless, modern man tries to compensate for the disruption of natural order and absence of inherited identity by embracing artificial order and manufactured identity. The results have not been such as to inspire optimism.

Worse still, says Legutko, propaganda and distorted teaching of history has instilled in the intellectual class a “superstitious fear of leaving the secure territories of liberal-democratic orthodoxy,” so any attempt to criticize liberal democracy will run up against an army of loud and assertive defenders:

[L]iberal democracy, like communism, produced large numbers of lumpen-intellectuals, [so] there is no shortage of people who ecstatically become involved in tracking disloyalty and fostering a new orthodoxy. It happens that both systems never suffered from a shortage of people willing—often without being asked—to survey the political purity in communities, institutions, groups, and all types of social behavior.

Naturally Legutko’s chief interest is his native Poland, so he does not mention—and indeed may not even be aware—that in America enforcers of liberal democratic orthodoxy very frequently style themselves “conservative.” The [writings](#) of the late Christopher Hitchens are within the pale for the conservative establishment, as are [defenses](#) of Hitchens’ inspiration, the Marxist Leon Trotsky. Patrick Buchanan is not. Why? To borrow Legutko’s wording, “democratic liberals intuitively sensed they had a deeper bond, no matter how unclear, with the communists than with the anticommunists.”

Having established such hegemony over discourse as to render their own suppositions almost invisible, liberal democrats have far surpassed the Communist Party when it comes to effecting a revolutionary transformation of society. In the modern West there is no need for anything like a “liberal democratic” faction as such, for nobody feels obliged to argue on behalf of liberal democracy. It is simply assumed, like the air we breathe. Yet according to Legutko the air is poisoned. Those who want something fresh whereby they might clear their minds are advised to seek out this bold and extraordinary book.

***The Demon in Democracy: Totalitarian Temptations in Free Societies***

by Ryszard Legutko

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