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The Old and New Socialism of Bernie Sanders: Should Catholics Support It?

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As Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., has become the strong 2020 Democratic front-runner after his wins in Iowa, New Hampshire and most recently and commandingly in Nevada, renewed questions have arisen about what his “Democratic socialism” means and what his policies would mean for religious freedom — and about how compatible his political philosophy is with the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Even his Democratic primary opponents now are taking direct aim at Sanders’ socialism.

On the debate stage in Las Vegas, billionaire candidate Michael Bloomberg said, “We’re not going to throw out capitalism. ... Other countries tried that. It was called communism, and it just didn’t work.” Sanders, whose proposal prompted the remark, called it a “cheap shot,” claiming his Democratic socialism was “for working people, not billionaires — health care for all, educational opportunities for all.”

And following Sanders’ landslide Nevada victory, Pete Buttigieg warned, “Sen. Sanders believes in an inflexible, ideological revolution that leaves out most Democrats, not to mention most Americans.”

The 78-year-old Sanders grew up in Brooklyn, New York, in a Jewish family. Although currently he is “not actively involved in organized religion,” he told The New York Times editorial board in December that he is “proud to be Jewish.”

Sanders took to socialist politics at a young age; in college, he was an active member of the Young People’s Socialist League, the youth affiliate of the Socialist Party of America.

He unsuccessfully ran for governor of Vermont as a member of the anti-war Liberty Union party in the 1970s. In 1976, Sanders told The Burlington Free Press that he favored “the public ownership of utilities, banks and major industries.”

In the 1980s, as the centrist Democratic group Third Way noted in a Feb. 22 critique of Sanders’ socialist perspectives, Sanders campaigned for candidates of the Socialist Workers Party, which openly advocated “the abolition of capitalism” and “the destruction of the bourgeois state.”

Costly Campaign Platform

Sanders remains strongly committed to government nationalization. In terms of his 2020 campaign policies, his “Medicare for All” plan would nationalize health care, at a cost he estimated at \$33 trillion, and his “Green New Deal” climate plan would nationalize electricity production and “transform our energy system to 100% renewable energy.”

Other initiatives include his “College for All” proposal, which would guarantee “tuition and debt-free public colleges, universities, HBCUs, Minority Serving Institutions and trade schools to all,” alongside a range of other measures whereby the federal government also would pay for a variety of non-tuition costs and fees and free universal child care and pre-K.

Sanders also proposes an annual “extreme wealth” tax on households with a net worth of more than \$32 million, intended to “substantially break up the concentration of wealth and power of this small privileged class.”

According to Larry Summers, former chief White House economic adviser under President Barack Obama and former treasury secretary under President Bill Clinton, Sanders’ proposed massive expansion of government would be unprecedented in American history.

“On the spending side ... this is far more radical than all previous presidencies, on either the right or the left,” Summers told CNN in January. “The Sanders spending increase is roughly 2.5 times the size of the New Deal and the estimated fiscal impact of George McGovern’s campaign proposals.”

Summers added, “We are in a kind of new era of radical proposal.”

Praise for Communist Regimes

During his time as mayor of Burlington, Vermont, Sanders visited and praised the Soviet Union and Nicaragua. In 1985 he said in an interview that Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega was “an impressive guy,” noting that “health care in Nicaragua is now free,” while acknowledging that the quality of the care was bad.

Sanders also called bread lines in Nicaragua “a good thing,” since “in other countries, people don’t line up for food; rich people get the food and poor people starve to death.”

He also praised Cuban dictator Fidel Castro, saying, that for the Cuban people, “he educated their kids, gave their kids health care, totally transformed the society.” in 1989, Sanders wrote that “they are in fact creating a very different value system than the one we are familiar with.”

Sanders was challenged on the 2016 debate stage about his praise of Castro and Ortega. He replied, “What that was about was saying that the United States was wrong to try to invade Cuba, that the United States was wrong trying to support people to overthrow the Nicaraguan government.”

2016 Democratic presidential nominee and former first lady Hillary Clinton pointed out that Sanders had “praised what he called the revolution of values in Cuba.”

“If the values are that you oppress people, you disappear people, imprison people or even kill people for expressing their opinions, for expressing freedom of speech, that is not the kind of revolution of values that I ever want to see anywhere,” she said.

Sanders replied that while Cuba was authoritarian, “they have made some good advances in health care. They are sending doctors all over the world. They have made some progress in education.”

In the spring of 1988, Sanders honeymooned in the Soviet Union and praised them for the “cleanest, most effective mass transit system that I’ve ever seen.” The Washington Post reported that during the trip Sanders “criticized the cost of housing and health care in the United States, while lauding the lower prices — but not the quality — of that available in the Soviet Union.”

During his time in the U.S. House of Representatives, Sanders backed Nicolás Maduro’s predecessor Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. The Wall Street Journal noted that he signed a letter of support for Chavez in January 2003 while “property confiscation at gunpoint, politically motivated arrests and state-sponsored gang violence” were occurring. He has repeatedly refused to call Maduro a “dictator.”

And on 60 Minutes last Sunday, Sanders once again praised Castro, after he was confronted with his past praise of the Cuban dictator. He commented, “We’re very opposed to the authoritarian nature of Cuba, but, you know, it’s simply unfair to say everything is bad.”

“When Fidel Castro came into office, you know what he did?” He continued, “He had a massive literacy program. Is that a bad thing? Even though Fidel Castro did it?”

These remarks resulted in bipartisan outrage and condemnation from Florida’s congressional delegation who represent many Cuban Americans.

‘Democratic Socialism’

When confronted with the question of what his “Democratic socialism” is and how it differs from communist regimes, Sanders says he aims to reduce wealth inequality while maintaining democracy and compares it to systems in Scandinavian countries.

“I have spent my whole life fighting for democracy, fighting against authoritarianism, whether the Soviet Union, Venezuela or anyplace else,” Sanders said. “What I mean by democratic socialism is creating a government that works for everybody, not controlled either legislatively or politically by a handful of very wealthy people. ... It means that in America we have certain economic rights that are human rights, human rights. Health care, to my mind, is not a privilege. It is a human right.”

But while Sanders often cites Scandinavian countries when discussing Democratic socialism, many have argued that the countries Sanders references, including Sweden and Denmark, are not examples of Sanders-style socialism.

Danish Prime Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen clarified that Denmark is not a socialist country after Sanders used it as an example in a speech in 2015.

“I would like to make one thing clear: Denmark is far from a socialist-planned economy. Denmark is a market economy,” he said. Finnish President Sauli Niinistö similarly replied, “No, God bless,” when asked if Finland was socialist.

Swedish author and Cato Institute fellow Johan Norberg explained recently that in the 1970s and 1980s Sweden implemented socialist policies that “ended in a terrible crisis in the early 1990s.” Sweden now has low corporate taxes, free trade and “in many of those areas, we are more fiercely capitalist than the United States. ... Those don’t seem to be the policies that the Sanders supporters are in favor of.”

Regarding Swedish health care, he said, “Lots of Americans think it’s a ‘Medicare for All’ thing. But it’s not even a national system. It’s a regional system. We had a problem with productivity and investment in the health-care sector. So now we have more freedom of choice and more competition in the provision of health care.”

Religious Intolerance?

Beyond economic concerns, Sanders’ policies also have implications for religious freedom. His Medicare for All Act would abolish the Hyde Amendment and require taxpayer funding of abortion without any religious-freedom exemptions.

Recently, Sanders raised eyebrows when he reversed his stance on whether or not pro-life Democrats belong in the party. In 2017, he campaigned with Omaha, Nebraska, mayoral candidate Heath Mello, who backed pro-life policies.

“The truth is that in some conservative states there will be candidates that are popular candidates who may not agree with me on every issue,” Sanders said at the time. “You just can’t exclude people who disagree with us on one issue.”

However, during a recent MSNBC town hall on abortion, Sanders said that “being pro-choice is an absolutely essential part of being a Democrat,” when asked if there was such a thing as a pro-life Democrat.

Sanders also generated controversy at a recent Senate confirmation hearing by saying that the Christian belief of Russell Vought, President Trump’s nominee for deputy director of the Office of Management and Budget, that Muslims “do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ his Son, and they stand condemned,” was “hateful” and “Islamophobic.”

Sanders defended his comments on CNN, saying Vought’s remarks were “unacceptable as a government official.”

Catholic Support and Church Teachings

Sanders has a wide lead in polling of Democratic voters ages 18-29, including with some young Catholics who see his policies as aligned with aspects of Catholic doctrine despite his position on abortion.

A November 2019 survey by the Victims of Communism Memorial Foundation and YouGov found 70% of millennials, ages 23-38, were likely to vote for a socialist. It also found that 36% of millennials viewed communism favorably. And in the new EWTN News/RealClear Opinion

Research poll, young Catholics aged 18-34 who classified themselves as “devout” favored Sanders over President Trump by a 53%-42% margin.

Matthew Sitman, a writer for Commonweal, told the Catholic Herald, “arguably no candidate’s economic agenda so closely aligns with Catholic social teaching. He is the most pro-union candidate running and believes everyone has a right to health care, a job and housing. He shares Pope Francis’ urgency about climate change, backing the ambitious Green New Deal.”

“He believes in the humane and welcoming treatment of immigrants and refugees,” he added. “He’s the peace candidate — no candidate is more willing to challenge the prevailing foreign-policy consensus that’s caused so much death and destruction.”

New York Times opinion writer Elizabeth Bruenig, a young Catholic who has voiced support for Sanders, wrote that she would “support a kind of socialism that would be democratic and aimed primarily at decommodifying labor, reducing the vast inequality brought about by capitalism, and breaking capital’s stranglehold over politics and culture.”

Sanders briefly met with Pope Francis in April 2016, during a visit to the Vatican during that year’s primary campaign, and praised the Pope comments “demanding that morality be part of our economy.” And in a February 2016 interview, Sanders called Pope Francis a socialist.

“What it means to be a socialist, in the sense of what the Pope is talking about, what I’m talking about, is to say that we have got to do our best and live our lives in a way that alleviates human suffering, that does not accelerate the disparities of income and wealth,” he said.

However, while Pope Francis has criticized unfettered capitalism and the “idolatry of money,” he has also said, “The Marxist ideology is wrong.”

The Church has historically condemned socialism and communism. In July 1949, Pope Pius XII issued his “Papal Decree Against Communism,” stating that “Christians who profess, defend or promote materialistic Communist doctrine incur the penalty of excommunication as apostates from the Christian faith.”

Pope St. John XXIII wrote in 1961 that “no Catholic could subscribe even to moderate Socialism,” because “socialism ... takes no account of any objective other than that of material well-being” and “places too severe a restraint on human liberty.”

Perspectives From Cuba and Venezuela

Is Sanders’ “democratic socialism” sufficiently different from the socialism the Church has condemned in the past? The Register spoke with two survivors of communist regimes who say it isn’t.

Carlos Eire, Ph.D., is a professor of history and religious studies at Yale, who, as a child, was airlifted out of Cuba in 1962 as part of the covert U.S. “Operation Peter Pan.” He told the Register that Sanders is “a Soviet Castro-style socialist” and “not a Scandinavian socialist, as he wants people to believe.” He said he has “d^éjà vu” with Sanders’ policy proposals, as they are “like a carbon copy” of Castro’s. “He’s preaching the same gospel as those who have preceded him in communist countries,” he said.

“Bernie Sanders has gone to all these awful places and praised what he saw, and he hasn’t taken it back,” he added. “He praises the Castro regime, and he thinks they have wonderful health care and wonderful education and it’s a model.”

“To him, as is the case with many of these progressives, it’s not much different from a religious belief, and they have a kind of zeal for it that religious converts tend to have,” said Eire, who is Catholic. “Whatever proof you throw at them, they find some way of finding some good things about whatever awful things you bring up.”

“It’s anthropological, it’s psychological, but it’s also theological, and it’s also Augustinian, and it rests on the concept of original sin and the fact that human nature is not perfectible,” he said of the continued failure of socialism. “You cannot achieve a utopia. You cannot achieve the kind of perfection that socialists seek.”

Daniel Di Martino, a Catholic Venezuelan who lived under the Maduro regime until he came to the U.S. in 2016 as a student, told the Register that he saw “a lot of similarities between the proposals of Bernie Sanders and the proposals of Hugo Chavez, the man who destroyed my country.”

“We were promised free everything, from electricity, water, food, clothing, health care and education, and the price of those free things was an economy that was destroyed over time,” he said. What followed was “a gradual decline” until his family struggled to obtain necessities. “I had to save water, collect it from the rain, because there was no water service sometimes for weeks. Electricity was very unreliable, so we’d have a blackout randomly,” he said.

“What people need to know is that it’s not just because of some abstract word ‘socialism’ and because socialism is bad. It’s about the policies,” Di Martino said. “It’s about nationalization. ... Bernie Sanders has endorsed nationalizing public utilities like electricity and water several times.”

Di Martino pointed out that Sanders’ speechwriter, David Sirota, wrote an article “talking about the economic miracle of Hugo Chavez in Venezuela” in 2013, when “I already had to do long lines to buy groceries, to buy basic staples, and the economy was a mess with very high inflation. For him, that was an economic miracle.”

“Young people in the U.S. lack a perspective of how lucky we are, of how vulnerable our free-market system is, and how quickly we can follow the path of Venezuela if we implement the wrong policies,” Di Martino said, adding that part of the problem is “the failure of the education system to teach about the history of socialism.”