

The Faith of Ronald Reagan

My friend Dr. Paul Kengor teaches at Grove City College in Pennsylvania. He may be the last serious scholar in America who is still researching and publishing books on the communist menace that held half the world in its grip for 70 years. This, in itself, is astonishing. We have had no end of books and study centers dedicated to the study of that 12-year nightmare known as the Third Reich. As evil and virulent as Nazism was, its political grip was broken when Adolf Hitler shot himself in the Fuhrerbunker in Berlin on April 30, 1945.

We should give comparable attention to communism. It held sway for 70 years and gripped billions of people. Paul Kengor understands the link between communism and atheism. He knows that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's description of communism as "atheism with a knife at your child's throat" is the most concise definition of the Marxist philosophy that underlay an evil empire. That was an empire "built on bones."

Prof. Kengor's books on Ronald Reagan have all paid fulsome tribute to Reagan's religious faith. In this *American Spectator* column, he shows us that Reagan's personal faith was a constant in his life—even as his political allegiance changed from being a liberal Democrat in the New Deal era to a conservative Democrat to a conservative Republican.

Reagan famously said, "I didn't leave the Democrats; they left me." Millions of conservative Democrats felt the same way. Most of these were Democrats with strong religious convictions. If you were a Roman Catholic or evangelical in the 1980s, there was a high likelihood that you or your parents would be among the millions of "Reagan Democrats." It's worth noting here that we have not seen a comparable movement among Democrats for Bush, McCain or Romney.

There have been some Republicans—most notably former Indiana

Gov. Mitch Daniels—who have urged the Republican Party to declare a truce on social issues like abortion, marriage and religious liberty while vigorously spooning out the GOP elixir of smaller government and lower taxes. Stick to the economic issues, they say. But while this appeals to some, it can never command the kinds of majorities that Reagan enjoyed.

Reagan's biggest domestic problem as president was the congressional Republicans who feared his anti-communism and who eschewed his pro-family policies. This failure to embrace all elements of the Reagan coalition got the GOP clobbered in 1982 and 1986 in the midterm elections. This reduced cadre might be termed the Golden Calf Republicans because all they cared about was money.

The problem with Golden Calf Republicans is that they don't know where gold comes from. Ronald Reagan was more successful in selling conservative economics to Americans at the grass roots because the people formed a bond with him.

Reagan understood the need for compassionate conservatism, to be sure, but he realized that that compassion should well up from families, from churches and synagogues, and from voluntary associations. As president, Ronald Reagan reinvigorated what social scientists have called the *mediating structures*.

Reagan had a deep understanding of that amazing quality that the great French political scientist Alexis de Tocqueville first described in *Democracy in America*: our genius for "voluntary association." Reagan understood that too much government interference crowded out and starved these important social institutions.

Tocqueville compared the French and the Americans. Let a flood or hurricane strike in America, he said, and the local people will immediately form committees to address the crisis. In France, he wrote, the peasants in distant provinces will fold

their arms and await direction from Paris to relieve their anguish.

This capacity for voluntary association, Tocqueville wrote, is the key to American democracy itself. Reagan grew up in the self-reliant Midwest. He understood all this.

Reagan's religious faith also gave him a faith in the common sense of common people. He had a healthy skepticism of "experts"—those credentialed bureaucrats and administrators who think they can order our lives better from a distant capital city than we can ourselves.

Douglas Brinkley is a respected scholar with a Ph.D. in history. He was selected by Nancy Reagan to edit Ronald Reagan's diaries. I love the surprised reaction of Brinkley to what those diaries revealed. Prof. Brinkley has said, with an air of astonishment: Ronald Reagan was really *smart*.

Reagan's achievements can be attributed to the fact that Reagan did not seek to persuade us that he was really smart or that he knew better how to run our neighborhood schools, our local communities, our churches and synagogues, and our voluntary associations than we did.

Stumping for votes in the Midwest in 1979, Gov. Reagan paused in front of a TV to watch the return of Pope John Paul II to his Polish homeland. Poland was then still in the grip of communism, under Soviet domination. Communism is atheism. But a million Poles gathered for an open-air Mass. Gov. Reagan halted his campaign for the White House to listen to those Poles chanting, "We want God!" To say you want God is to say you don't want communism. Reagan teared up at that miraculous chant. He said simply, "I want to work with him."

As president, Ronald Reagan *did* work with the pope to free hundreds of millions of people in Eastern Europe and the USSR. The fact that Russia has now slipped back under historic despotism can be attributed in no small measure to the failure

of U.S. diplomacy. Successive U.S. administrations never pressed the post-Soviet leadership for guarantees of religious freedom. Still, Eastern Europe remains largely free because Reagan never lost faith in freedom.

When he went to the Brandenburg Gate in 1987, President Reagan famously said, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall." We all know what happened to the Berlin Wall.

But the president said something else that was not widely reported at the time. He described the radio tower built by the puppet communist East German regime. That tower overshadowed all the church steeples and synagogue walls in the Soviet sector of Berlin.

President Reagan described the "defect" that the Communists had tried to paint over and sandblast. They even attempted to etch it away with acid. But when the sun strikes the globe on that radio tower, it reflects the sign of the cross!

I had studied the public statements of all the U.S. presidents. I had never encountered such an amazing affirmation of Christian faith before. While he never sought to force anyone to share his beliefs, Ronald Reagan was unapologetic about his Christian faith. Perhaps that's why so many Americans honor his memory.

Robert Morrison *is senior fellow for policy studies at Family Research Council. This article appeared on Thursday.*