Wayne Price
Religion and Revolution
2009

Retrieved on May 7th, 2009 from www.anarkismo.net
Written for www.Anarkismo.net

theanarchistlibrary.org

Religion and Revolution

Wayne Price

2009

say anything it wishes about abortion rights and to try to persuade its followers. But it must not be able to impose its views by the power of the police and the courts. Separation of church and state also means that there must be no government-imposed atheism as under the so-called Communist states.

Ultimately, the only complete separation of church and state will occur with the abolition of the state. In a socialist-anarchist society, people will be free to associate with each other in religious, cultural, or philosophical societies, if they wish. If the churches are right, then under freedom there will be a flowering of religion. In my opinion, however, the present day religions are likely to die out and new, nontheistic, worldviews will develop.

Right now, humanistic antiauthoritarians should be willing to work together with people who have all sorts of views on religion and philosophy. There should be no barriers set up in our revolutionary organizations. But there should be discussions of real political issues. Many anarchists who are religious are pacifists. While I respect their views and am willing to work with them, I think this is a political error. I do not think we should be in the same revolutionary organization. Dealing with religious radicals, it is important to know their views on women's reproductive rights and on Gay liberation. These issues may or may not be important areas of disagreement. In any case, it is such immediate issues which most need to be discussed, not how we think the universe is ultimately organized.

(science itself is based on the values of truth and knowledge) but science as such does not provide the answers.

Humans think not only in left-brain, logical, analytical, linear fashion, but also in a right-brain, wholistic, simultaneous fashion. We express our views of the world and community in analogies, metaphors, images, and ceremonies, with individual and group art, music, and poetry. Compared to science, this way of thinking is neither right nor wrong, just different. A free future society will create its own art, its own philosophical metaphors, and its own public ceremonies, whether they resemble today's religions or not.

Today, however, we live under capitalism, along with racism, sexism, sexual repression, and an alienated way of life. Of course many people look to religion to relieve their pain and give their lives meaning. Many feel they need a powerful but loving father-figure to protect them, whatever the reality. If we were to wait for most people to become atheists before having a revolution, we will wait forever. From a materialist analysis, capitalism creates popular religion, and religion will not die out until capitalism itself will be ended and a new social reality is created.

What really is the problem with religion? It is not that workers believe in a supernatural god. It is what goes along with it. Thinking that they know the thoughts of the Almighty, so many believers claim the right to impose their views on everyone else. Knowing the Absolute Truth, or so they think (lacking the virtue of humility), they feel that they can deny women the right to abortions, prevent youth from having sex, discriminate againt Gays (or kill them), whip up war fever, and denounce anyone who rejects capitalism. It must be said that this is no worse (or better) than the Marxist-Leninist atheists who also think they know the Absolute Truth, as revealed by Karl Marx, as carried out by the Historical Process — and that this permits them to set up dictatorships and murder millions of people.

So long as there are states, we raise the old bourgeois-democratic demand of "separation of church and state." The church is free to

Contents

proach leaves me open to working with religious people. But first, why don't I believe in God?

Aside from the point that we no longer need God to explain the world's workings, is the fact that the world we live in just does not fit with the concept of God. God is supposed to be all-powerful, the creator of everything. At the same time, He is supposed to be all-good, the fountainhead of all goodness, kindness, and justice: "God is Love," they say. Plainly we do not live in a world run by such a god. Without denying the existence of love and joy, there is too much misery and injustice in this world for it to be possibly run by an all-good, all-powerful, being. It doesn't compute.

Theologicans call this "the problem of evil." They account for it by referring to "free will." Since God gives people free will, they say, people must be able to chose evil instead of good. This may explain why God "allowed" the Hutu militias in Ruanda to commit genocidal murder against the Tutsi (although it seems rather hard on, say, the Tutsi children, whose free will was not given room to develop). But it does not explain suffering caused by natural events, such as the tsunami in the Indean Ocean or epidemics. Free will has nothing to do with it. Granted that human action may make natural disasters worse or better, but that is the point, that only human action (advances in science, technology, and social organization) can decrease suffering, not reliance on God.

Why I do not Believe in "Militant Atheism"

However, this does not altogether end the discussion. Regardless of God, humans will continue to look-for-and-make meanings. We seek-and-commit-to values and purposes for ourselves and our communities. Whether these are graven in the fabric of the universe or not (and I think not), we develop these out of the stuff of the world and our human relationships. Science contributes to this

peace and plenty, of freedom and mutual aid. Religion preserved such ideals for the time when they could become real in practice — and still they are often expressed in religious terms.

When Marx referred to religion as the "opiate" of the people, it is usually misinterpreted as though he was saying that religion was addictive. But in his day, opium was widely used as a painkiller, and he was saying that religion served to dull the pain of people's suffering under capitalism — but that now it was possible to end suffering caused by social conditions.

In the history of socialism, there has been a minority of religious socialists, such as recent Latin American, Catholic, advocates of "liberaion theology" or some of the African-American, Protestant, advocates of "Black liberation theology." Among anarchists, the most famous Christian was Leo Tolstoy, although Jacques Ellul, better known for his critique of technology, was also one. Probably the most wide-spread anarchist ppublication in North America is the Catholic Worker, founded by Dorothy Day. The Jewish theologican Martin Buber was influenced by anarchist-communism. The Hindu Gandhi was not an anarchist (he founded the Indian state!) but he was a decentralist, and exchanged letters with Tolstoy.

Also, in modern times we have learned that it is possible for atheists to take power, with their own brand of "naterialism." And these atheists, these Marxist-Leninists, created as much oppression, injustice, and suffering as all the ages of God-sanctioned rule. Atheism, in itself, is not the solution.

Why I Do Not Believe in God

While I reject "militant atheisim," in either Bakunin or Lenin's conception, I personally do not believe in God. I prefer to call this "humanism," since "atheism" is only negative (what I do not believe in) rather than positive (what I am for), a human-centered and naturalistic approach to values and ways of living. A humanistic ap-

Author's Note: While I personally do not belive in God, I am against any "militant atheist" anti-religious campaigns. It is our practical political opinions which are important on whether anarchists can work together (abortion, GLBT liberation, sex, pacifism), not our views on God.

So long as there are states, we raise the old bourgeois-democratic demand of "separation of church and state." The church is free to say anything it wishes about abortion rights and to try to persuade its followers. But it must not be able to impose its views by the power of the police and the courts. Separation of church and state also means that there must be no government-imposed atheism as under the so-called Communist states.

"My country is the world. My religion is to do good."

— Tom Paine, U.S. revolutionary democrat and deist.

There has been a rise in the number of recent books criticizing religion. Sometimes called "the new atheism," they have attracted an audience partially due to a revulsion against the religious right. Christian fundamentalists entered politics as pawns of the far right, supporting big business, military intervention, and the repression of women and GLBT people. This provoked a backlash among many people. Meanwhile, the current enemy of the U.S. empire is no longer the "godless Communists," as it was during the Cold War. Instead it is a fanatical, authoritarian, wing of Islam, which uses God to justify mass murder. While this leads some people to say that this proves Christianity or Judiaism to be superior to Islam, others conclude that all religious fanaticism and authoritarianism are bad. (Note: by "religion" I do not mean a search for meaning or a cultural identification, but a belief in a supernatural being, a god.)

The traditions of the revolutionary far-left are generally anti-religious, for good reasons. Down through the ages, almost all religions, at least the established, organized, ones with sacred writings, have supported the existing states and ruling classes (as well as oppression of women and general sexual repression). Even those which have implied criticisms of the establishment have counseled passivity and withdrawal. Naturally we who have been committed to the overthrow of all rulers have opposed these views. The very concept of "obeying" a Supreme Authority is abhorrent to many freedom-loving people.

By definition, religions look to another world and internal, spiritual, transformations of individuals to relieve suffering. But radicals think that the solution for suffering lies in this-worldly practical activities by masses of people to change the actual social system (or other material methods of ending suffering, such as scientific

medicine to cure diseases). This is basically a different orientation from the religious approach.

Not surprisingly, modern schools of revolutionary socialism, both anarchism and Marxism, were founded by people committed to atheism. This includes Michael Bakunin as well as Karl Marx, and their comrades and co-thinkers. Bakunin hated religion and the churches, calling for them to be "abolished," along with the state and capitalism. Marx developed a "materialist" conception of the world which had no place for a god. Unlike Bakunin, Marx did not advocate a focus on religion while opposing capitalism, regarding it as a private matter. But later, Lenin and his followers insisted on fighting religion, calling this "militant atheism."

Revolutionary Religion

Yet there has also been a minority tradition of religious rebelliousness. It has used the slogans, "No master but God" and "Resistance to tyranny is obedience to God." During the bourgeois-democratic revolutions (which laid the basis for industrial capitalism), several revolutionary movements expressed themselves in religious terms. Some, such as the Anabaptists in central Europe, or the Levellers in Britain, forshadowed modern socialism.

A materialist point of view would say that religion is not a crude matter of ignorance but a response of human beings to their material existence, their real activity. This included the reality that there was great suffering and injustice in most people's lives. Yet, for most of human existence, it was not objectively possible to end class society, given the low level of production (up until past the beginning of the Industrial Revolution). Yet the desire existed for freedom, cooperation, and an end to toil. Such human values were expressed in the only way they could be, through religion. So along with its expression of the acceptance of oppression, religion also expressed people's hope for an end to oppression, for a world of