

Anarchy & Religion

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August 2020

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Branded by Society

For a long time, people have identified as "Christian-anarchists", "Jewish-anarchists", "Muslim-anarchists", and so on. This is accepted without question in most anarchist circles, where goals of inclusivity tend to supersede any misgivings people might have with the inherent top-down and patriarchal nature of most religious affiliations.

I don't think it makes any sense to try and merge anarchy with these explicit systems of authority, and much like "anarcho-capitalism", I think attempting to hitch anarchy's wagon to blatant forms of authority is a misguided impulse that comes about in people who have been thoroughly indoctrinated in authoritarian systems and are unwilling to fully part with forms of authority they have nostalgic attachment to. The feeling of comfort or security their religion provides them with leads to them trying to reform their religion into something more egalitarian when they decide they like the economic and societal ideas presented by anarchy, but don't wish to part with their long-held religious beliefs.

I feel I should be clear that anarchists have no right to force their views on people that subscribe to organized religion. I simply want to explore some of the inherently authority-based principles religious organizations hold as sacrosanct and try to understand why religious anarchists feel the need to essentially retcon their favored religion to force a tenuous compatibility with anarchy.

As usual, I should also be clear I don't ascribe to the concept of an "anarchist society", so this isn't an attempt to say religion should be "banned" in a non-existing "anarchist society". I don't think such a thing possible.

Anarchy is an anti-authoritarian mindset, an ongoing process we all go through to question and overcome authority. It is not a artificially constructed system, or a "society" to govern people by. It's not a permanent state of affairs where authority somehow ceases to exist. Authority will always exist, and will especially thrive within formal systems of power and control where conformity and obedience are held up as desirable. And if a group of people did somehow "achieve" anarchy, and then try to forbid people from having religious beliefs, that anarchy would of course immediately be lost in the attempt to assert authority over others.

You can certainly be religious ("spiritual") without supporting authority. You can believe in other-earthly beings or spirits or even gods without needing to build hierarchies and authoritarian rituals around them. But almost all "Big Religion" is absolutely authority-based and was designed that way from its inception.

Monotheism was created by civilized men to accustom the peasantry to being ruled by a great man in the sky, so they'd be equally as amenable to being ruled by a great man in a castle (or later: a presidential palace or a factory or an office).

The authority of monotheism was rapidly forced on the world at the point of the sword, replacing polytheism in the vast majority of cultures. Religious and civil leaders deemed polytheists to be "uncivilized heathens" and slaughtered them if they refused to fall in line with the new world order. It was no accident that monotheism and civilization evolved side by side. Diverse polycultures replaced by a rigid global monoculture that could be easily dominated by rulers.

Slavery was greatly assisted by several of these new monotheist religions that directly condoned the practice, providing easy moral justification for slave owners, and keeping slaves from resisting the system, lest they suffer eternal damnation. The Roman church loudly condemned slaves who escaped their masters, and refused them communion. It's not hard to understand why

religious societies were so quick to prop up slavery when the holy books they live their lives by go out of their way to normalize the practice:

”Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers” (Gn 9:25)

This is a quote from the Old Testament, where Noah condemns Canaan (Son of Ham) to eternal slavery. Christians and some Muslims then identified Ham’s descendants as black Africans, which allowed them to morally justify centuries of racialized slavery in their societies, constructing the idea that certain members of the human race should live in perpetual servitude to them. This is a recurring theme with organized religion, as religious documents invariably build authority in the cultures that hold them up as sacred.

The New Testament continued the tradition of telling the faithful to accept bondage and goes further in telling slaves to accept their slave-masters like they would a God:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people. (Ephesians 6:5-7)

The Bible’s legitimization of slavery was predictably taken to its natural conclusion by religious groups throughout history. In Barbados in 1710, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts were granted plantations to fund their Codrington College. Several hundred slaves were forced to work the plantations and using a red hot iron, their chests were branded with the word ”Society”, to signify their ownership by the church. To this day, religious people colonize other lands using their holy texts to justify every atrocity they commit. It’s much easier to justify atrocities to yourself and others when you can point to a verse in a sacred text and say ”the one true God is okay with this”. Religion has a way of absolving tyrants of guilt, shifting the blame to mystical authority figures who are beyond reproach.

But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. (Matthew 5:39)

Religions that involve forced body modification, indoctrination as an infant or child, require deference and reverence to godly beings, idols, texts, symbols, elders or church leaders, or simply instruct you to turn the other cheek when you’re being exploited, can’t honestly be described as being compatible with anarchy. To be an anarchist is to resist authority in every facet of life, not to close your eyes to authority when it’s convenient to.

Circumcision is one example of a religious ceremony that has life-long implications. Forcing children to undergo non essential surgery is not an anarchist action, so anyone doing it can’t claim to be doing anarchy while forcibly mutilating an infant. Forcibly invading a child’s bodily autonomy means you’re not practising anarchy. There’s no way to pretend that an infant can be a willing participant in such a thing.

Forcing children to participate in your religious practices before they’re old enough to make an informed voluntary decision and forcing life-changing rituals on their bodies from infancy places authority on them. They’re too young to volunteer to circumcision or baptism or female genital mutilation or even understand what is being done to them.

You can be a religious person and also an anarchist since most people are born into religions and the process of freeing your mind from authority is a lifelong pursuit with no real completion, but you can't claim that forcing unnecessary surgery on a baby is an anarchist action. It's just not. It's entirely anti-anarchy. The same goes for accepting subservience to a master and telling others to be okay with exploitation, to forgive their exploiters and to not fight back.

Organized religion is dictated from above by the church i.e. the authority on the religion. It's a system of rulers and obeyers and has been used to justify every atrocity under the sun. To attempt to redeem these bloody authoritarian institutions by associating them with anarchist ideals is to participate in a coercive and destructive lie. Pinning a black flag to institutions that have carved a path of unrelenting carnage across history: colonizing and slaughtering everything they touch, does no favors for anarchy, and only helps church authorities mask their blood soaked robes for just long enough to grab their next victim by the neck.

Like all authority, the authority of religion will not stand still. In times of conflict, people who refuse to conform to the favored religion will be scapegoated, will be oppressed, will be murdered in the name of all that is holy and good and just.

A religion is as big an authority as any other and like all authority, its growth cannot be curtailed. Certainly not by a few advocates of more libertarian forms of the religion. The dominant strands will always be unapologetically authoritarian and become brutally oppressive in times of cultural strife and warfare. All the reform-minded offshoots will do is create justification for perpetuating the religion until the mainline authoritarian strands can rain bloody murder down on the godless heathens that resist the authority of the church and its invisible almighty ruler that conveniently can never be held accountable for the atrocities committed in his name.

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