

Anarchy and the Church

Elisée Reclus

1900

The conduct of the anarchist towards the man of the Church is mapped out in advance. As long as priests, monks and all holders of a supposedly divine power are constituted in a league of domination, they must be fought without respite with all the energy of one's will and all the resources of one's intelligence and strength. Moreover, this fierce struggle must in no way prevent us from maintaining personal respect and all human sympathy for each individual, Christian, Buddhist or fetishist as soon as his power of attack and domination has been broken. We will begin by freeing ourselves, then we will work towards the liberation of the former adversary.

What we have to fear from the Church or churches is clearly taught by history. In this regard, any misunderstanding, any confusion is impossible. We are hated, execrated, cursed: we are not only doomed to the tortures of hell, — which has no meaning for us, — but we are pointed out to the vindictiveness of temporal laws, to the special vengeance of kings, jailers and executioners, even to the ingenuity of the torturers whom the Holy Inquisition, still alive, maintains in the dungeons. The official language of the popes, fulminated in their recent bulls, expressly directs the campaign against the “insane and diabolical innovators, the proud disciples of a pretended science, the delirious people who praise freedom of conscience, the despisers of all sacred things, the odious corrupters of youth, the workers of crime and iniquity.” These cursed, these anathemas, are, in the first place, those who call themselves men of revolution, anarchists or libertarians.

That is good! It is just! It is legitimate for people who call themselves and even believe themselves to be sacred in order to exercise absolute domination over the human race, to imagine that they are the possessors of the keys to heaven and hell, to concentrate all the force of their hatred against the reprobates who contest their rights to power and to condemn all the manifestations of this power: “Exterminate! Exterminate!” such is the motto of the Church, as in the times of Saint Dominic and Innocent III.

To Catholic intransigence, we oppose equal intransigence, but as men and as men nourished by contemporary science, not as miracle workers and executioners. We absolutely reject Catholic doctrine, as well as that of all related religions, friends or enemies; we combat their institutions and their works; we work to destroy the effects of all their acts. But this without hatred of their persons, for we are not unaware that all men are determined by the environment in which their mothers have cradled them and society has nourished them; we know that another education, less favorable circumstances could have made us stupid too, and what we seek above all is precisely

to create for them, — if there is still time — and for all generations to come, new conditions which will finally cure men of the “madness of the cross” and other religious hallucinations.

We do not think of taking revenge when the day comes when we will be the strongest: scaffolds and stakes would not suffice, so many infidels have the Churches massacred in the name of their respective gods, so many victims has the Christian Church in particular made during fifteen hundred years of domination. Revenge is not in our principles, because hatred calls for hatred and we are eager to enter a new era of social peace. The firm intention that we wish to achieve is not to use “the guts of the last priest to wring the neck of the last king!”, but to ensure that neither priests nor kings can be born in the purified atmosphere of our new society.

Logically, our revolutionary work against the Church begins by being destructive before it can become constructive, although the two phases of action are interdependent and are accomplished at the same time, but under different aspects, according to the different environments. Certainly, we know that force is inapplicable to destroy sincere beliefs, naive and blissful illusions; we will not seek to enter into consciences to expel troubles and dreams, but we can work with all our energies to remove from social functioning everything that does not agree with recognized scientific truths; We can constantly combat the error of all those who claim to have found outside of humanity and the world a divine point of support, allowing parasitic castes to disguise themselves as devout intermediaries between the fictitious creator and his creatures.

Since fear and terror have always been the motives that enslaved men, — as kings, priests, magicians and pedagogues have themselves repeated in so many different forms, — let us incessantly combat this terror of the gods and their interpreters by study and by the exposition of the serene clarity of things. Let us hunt down all the lies that the beneficiaries of ancient theological stupidity have spread in teaching, in books, in the arts. And let us not forget to stop the vile payment of direct taxes that the clergy extorts from us, to stop the construction of chapels, altars, churches, crosses, votive statues and other ugliness that dishonor our cities and our countryside. Let us dry up the source of these millions that, from all sides, flow towards the great beggar of Rome and towards the innumerable sub-beggars of his congregations. Finally, through daily propaganda, let us take away from the priests the children they are given to baptize, the boys and girls they “confirm in the faith” by the ingestion of a host, the young people they claim to unite, the unfortunates they defile by causing sin to be born in their souls through confession, the dying they terrorize even at the last moment of life. Let us dechristianize ourselves! Let us dechristianize the people!

But schools, even those that call themselves secular, Christianize their students, that is to say, the entire thinking generation, we are told. And how will we close these schools, since we find before them fathers of families claiming the “freedom” of the education chosen by them? To us who speak incessantly of freedom and who understand the individual worthy of this name only in the fullness of his proud independence, here is also opposed “freedom”! If this word corresponded to a just idea, we would only have to bow with all respect in order to remain faithful to ourselves; but is this freedom of the father of a family anything other than the kidnapping, the pure and simple appropriation of a child who should belong to himself and who is handed over to the Church or the State, so that they can deform him at will? Is it not a freedom similar to that of the manufacturer who has hundreds or thousands of “arms” and who uses them as he wishes to crush metals or cross wires; a freedom like that of the general who maneuvers at will “tactical units” of “bayonets” and “sabers”?

The father, convinced heir to the Roman *pater familias*, also has his sons and daughters at his disposal, to kill them morally or, worse still, to debase them. Of these two individuals, the father and the child, virtually equal in our eyes, it is the weaker that we have to support with our strength; it is with him that we have to declare ourselves in solidarity, him that we will try to defend against all those who wrong him, be it the father himself or the one who calls himself such, be it the mother who carried him in her womb! If, by a special law imposed by public opinion, the State refuses the father of a family the right to condemn his son to ignorance, we who are at heart with the new generation, we will do everything in our power, and without laws, by the league of our wills, to protect the youth against a bad education. Whether the child is struck, beaten, tortured by parents, whether he is even gently poisoned with cakes, jams or lies, or whether he is catechized, depraved by ignorant brothers, whether he learns from the Jesuits a perfidious story, a false morality made of baseness and cruelty, the crime seems to us to be the same and we will fight it with energy, always fiercely, in solidarity with the being who has been wronged.

Certainly, as long as the family remains in its monarchical form, model of the States that govern us, the exercise of our firm will to intervene towards the child against the parents and the priests will remain a difficult accomplishment; but it is nonetheless in this direction that all our effort must be directed. To be the defender of justice or the accomplice of the crime, there is no middle ground!

In this matter, as in all other social questions, the great problem that is discussed between Tolstoy and the other anarchists arises, that of non-resistance or resistance to evil. For our part, we are of the opinion that the offended person who does not resist delivers in advance the humble and the poor to the oppressors and the rich. Let us resist without hatred, without a spirit of rancor or vengeance, with all the serene gentleness of the philosopher who possesses himself and reproduces exactly his deep thought and his intimate will in each of his acts, but let us resist! The present school, whether it is directed by the religious priest or by the secular priest, is clearly, absolutely directed against free men, as much as a sword or rather millions of swords would be, because it is a question of setting the children of the new generation against the innovators. We understand the school as society “without God or master” and we consequently consider as disastrous places all those dens where obedience to God and especially to his representatives, masters of all kinds, fathers and monks, kings and officials, symbols and laws, are taught. We condemn as much the schools where so-called civic duties are taught — that is, the fulfillment of orders from above and hatred of foreign peoples — as the schools where children are ordered to be nothing more than “sticks in the hands of priests”. We know that they are equally bad, and when we have the strength, we will close both of them like barracks and brothels.

A vain threat, one will say ironically. You are not the strongest, and we still command kings and soldiers, magistrates and executioners. Yes, that seems true; But all this apparatus of repression does not frighten us, because it is also a great strength to have the truth as an ally and to spread light before oneself. History unfolds in our favor, because if science has “failed” for our adversaries, it has remained our guide and our support. The essential difference between the supporters of the Church and its enemies, between the enslaved and the free, is that the former, deprived of their own initiative, existing only through the mass, not through individual value, gradually weaken and die, while the renewal of life takes place in us through the spontaneous action of anarchic forces. Our nascent society of free men, which is painfully trying to free itself from the bourgeois chrysalis, could have no hope of triumphing one day, it could not even

be born, if it had before it real men with a will and energy of its own, but the immense army of devotees, withered by prostration and obedience, remains condemned to intellectual ataxia. Whatever, from the special point of view of his trade, his art or his profession, the value of the believing and practicing Catholic, whatever also his qualities as a man, he is from the point of view of thought only an amorphous and inconsistent matter, since he has complacently abdicated his judgment and by blind faith, has placed himself outside of reasoning humanity.

However, the army of Catholics has the power of routine on its side, the functioning of all survivals, continuing to act by virtue of the force of inertia. Spontaneously the knees of millions of individuals bend before the priest resplendent in gold and silk; it is carried by a series of reflex movements that the crowd gathers in the naves on the days of patronal feasts; it celebrates Christmas and Easter because previous generations celebrated these feasts. The image of the Virgin Mary and that of the sacred Child remain engraved in the imagination; the skeptic venerates without knowing why the piece of copper or ivory carved into a crucifix; he bows while speaking of the "morality of the Gospel" and when he shows the stars to his son, he does not fail to glorify the divine watchmaker. Yes, all these creatures of habit, all these mouthpieces of routine constitute an army already formidable by its mass: it is human matter which constitutes the overwhelming majorities, and whose thoughtless cries resound as if they represented an opinion. What matters! This mass itself ends up no longer obeying atavistic impulses: we see it rapidly become indifferent to this religious jargon which it no longer understands; it no longer believes that the priest is an interpreter with God to remit sins, nor an interpreter with the devil to bewitch beasts and people; the peasant, like the worker, is no longer afraid of his priest. He has some idea of science, without yet knowing it and in the meantime, he becomes pagan again by vaguely trusting in the forces of nature.

Certainly, the silent revolution that is slowly de-Christianizing the popular masses is a major event, but we must not forget that the adversaries most to be feared because they have no sincerity are not the poor routine-loving people, nor especially the believers, suicides of the spirit, who are seen prostrating themselves in chapels as if separated by a thick veil from the real world. The ambitious hypocrites who lead them and the indifferent who, without being Catholics, have officially rallied to the Church, those who make money from the faith, are far more dangerous than the Christians. By a phenomenon that is apparently contradictory, the clerical army becomes more numerous as belief fades. This is because the enemy forces are massing on both sides. The Church has gathered behind it all its natural accomplices who need slaves to command, kings, soldiers, civil servants of all kinds, repentant Voltaireans and even honest fathers of families who want to be raised with well-behaved, stylish, graceful, polite children, with good manners, prudently guarding themselves from anything that might resemble a thought.

"What are you telling us!" will doubtless say some politician who is passionate about the current struggle between the congregations and the "republican bloc" of the French Parliament. "Don't you know that the State and the Church are definitively estranged, that the crucifixes, the images of the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary are going to be removed from schools and replaced by beautiful portraits of the President of the Republic? Do you not know that children are now carefully preserved from leprosy and ancient superstitions and that civil teachers will provide them with an education based on science, free from all falsehood, always respectful of freedom? Alas! we know well that there is dispute up there among the holders of power; we know that the clergy, the secular and the regulars disagree on the distribution of prebends and casuals; we know that the old quarrel of "investitures" continues from century to century between the pope

and the secular States; but that does not prevent the two holders of domination, religious and politicians, from being fundamentally in agreement, even in their reciprocal excommunications, and from understanding in the same way their divine mission with regard to the governed people. Both want to enslave and by the same means, both will give children the same teaching, that of obedience. At least, among these reverse educators, the priests are the most logical, since they claim to represent God, the Creator and Universal Master. Yesterday, under the high protection of the Republic, they were the absolute, uncontested masters.

All the elements of the reaction were then united under the same symbolic labarum, the “sign of the Cross”; it would have been naive to be deceived by the motto of this flag: it was no longer a question here of religious faith, but of domination, intimate belief was only a pretext for the majority of those who want to keep the monopoly of powers and wealth; for them the sole aim was to prevent at all costs the realization of the modern ideal, bread for all, freedom, work and leisure for all. Our enemies, although hating and despising each other, had nevertheless had to group themselves into a single party. Isolated, the respective causes of the ruling classes were too poor in arguments, too illogical for them to be able to try to defend themselves successfully; it was indispensable for them to attach themselves to a higher cause, to God himself, the “principle of all things”, the “great organizer of the Universe”. Thus, in a battle, the exposed bodies of troops abandon the newly constructed external works to mass in the center of the position, in the ancient citadel adapted by the engineers to modern warfare.

Too ardent in the quarry, the churchmen have also committed the blunder, which is inevitable, of not evolving quickly with the century. Encumbered by their baggage of old stuff, they have stayed on the road. They jargon in Latin and that is enough for them to no longer know how to speak the French of Paris. They drone on about the theology of Saint-Thomas, but this ancient verbiage is no longer of much use to them in discussing with Berthelot’s students. No doubt, some of them, especially the American priests, in struggle with a young democratic society, removed from the power of Rome, have tried to rejuvenate their arguments, refurbished somewhat their venerable flamberges, but these new ways of controversy have been frowned upon in high places, and misoneism has triumphed: the clergy is in the rearguard, with all the horrible band of magistrates, inquisitors and executioners. En masse, they have placed themselves behind the kings, the princes and the rich, and for the humble they know how to ask only for charity, not for justice, a modest corner in the future Paradise, and not a large and beautiful place in the good sun that illuminates us today. A few lost children of Catholicism have begged the Pope to become a socialist, to enter boldly into the ranks of the levelers and the starving. Oh no! He sticks to the millions that are called the “Peter’s Pence” and to this “straw bale” which is the Vatican Palace.

What a beautiful day for us, free and revolutionary thinkers, that during which the Pope has definitively locked himself in the dogma of his infallibility! Here is our good man seized as in a steel trap! We must not go back on our word, renew ourselves, live in a word! He is bound in the old dogmas, obliged to stick to the Syllabus, to curse modern society with all its discoveries and progress. He is now nothing more than a voluntary prisoner chained to the shore and pursuing us with his vain imprecations while we sail freely on the waves. By one of his subordinates, he proclaims the “bankruptcy of science!” What joy for us! It is the definitive triumph that the Church no longer wants to learn or know, that she remains forever ignorant, absurd, locked in what Saint Paul already called her madness!

But too greedy, the priests and monks lacked prudence; leaders of the conspiracy, bearers of the divine watchword, they wanted much more than their share. The Church, always keen

on plunder, did not fail to demand an entry fee from all her new allies, republicans and others; she demanded subsidies for all her foreign missions, she even demanded war in China and the pillaging of the imperial palaces. This is how the wealth of the clergy increased prodigiously: in France alone, ecclesiastical property more than doubled in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century; the lands and houses that belong openly to priests and monks are estimated at billions, but they still own billions under the names of old gentlemen and ancient dowagers! Jacobins almost rejoice to see these immense properties accumulate in the same hands, hoping that in one fell swoop the State will be able to seize them one day: a remedy that would displace the disease but not cure it! These properties, products of theft and fraud, must be taken back for the community since they were once its own. They are part of the great earthly wealth belonging to all of humanity.

Let us transport ourselves by imagination to the coming times of conscious and reasoned irreligion. What will be, in these new conditions, the work par excellence of men of good will? To replace hallucinations with precise observations, to substitute for the illusions of paradise that were promised to the starving the realities of a life of social justice, well-being, and rhythmic work, to find for the faithful of the humanitarian religion a happiness more substantial and more moral than that with which Christians are currently content. What they needed was not to have the painful labor of thinking for themselves and of seeking in their own conscience the motive for their actions; no longer having a visible fetish like our savage ancestors, they insist on possessing a secret fetish that heals their wounds of self-esteem, that consoles them in their sorrows, that makes their hours of illness less long and even assures them an immortal life, free from all worry. But all this for them personally: their religion does not care about the unfortunate who continue at their peril the hard battle of life; like the spectators of the storm of which Lucretius speaks, it is sweet to them to see, from the beach, the gestures of the shipwrecked struggling against the waves. They can reread in the Gospels this ugly parable of Lazarus “lying in Abraham’s bosom” and refusing to dip the tip of his finger in the water to refresh the tongue of the wicked rich. (Luke XVI).

Our ideal of happiness is not this Christian egoism of the man who saves himself by seeing his fellow man perish and who refuses a drop of water to his enemy. We, the anarchists who work for the complete emancipation of our individual, collaborate by this very fact in the freedom of all others, even that of the wicked rich man when we have relieved him of his riches, and we assure them the joint profit of each of our efforts. Our personal victory cannot be conceived without it becoming at the same time a collective victory; our search for happiness cannot be imagined otherwise than in the happiness of all: anarchist society is not a body of privileged people but a community of equals, and it will be for all a very great happiness of which we have no idea today, to live in a world where we will not see children beaten by their mothers while reciting the catechism, no starving people begging for a penny, no prostitutes giving themselves up to have bread, no able-bodied men becoming soldiers or even policemen, because they have no other means of earning their living. Reconciled because the interests of money, caste, position, will not make them born enemies of each other, men will be able to study together, take part, according to their personal affinities, in the collective works of planetary transformation, in the writing of the great book of human knowledge, in a word, live a free life, ever more ample, powerfully conscious and fraternal, thus escaping hallucinations, religiosity and the Church. And above all, they will be able to work directly for the future by taking care of children, enjoying nature with them, guiding them methodically in the study of science, the arts and life.

Although Catholics have officially taken over society, they are not and will not be its masters, because they only know how to stifle, compress, diminish: everything that is life escapes them. In most of them, faith itself is dead: all that remains is pious gesticulation, prostrations and ornaments, the telling of the rosary, the hum of the breviary. The best among the priests are obliged to flee the Church to find asylum among the profane, that is to say among the confessors of the new faith, among us, anarchists and revolutionaries, who march towards an ideal, and who work to realize it. It is outside the Church which has failed all great hopes, that all that is great and generous is accomplished. And it is outside it, in spite of it, that the poor to whom the priests ironically promised all the riches of Paradise, will finally conquer the well-being of the present life: it is in spite of the Church that the true Commune will be founded, the society of free men towards which so many previous revolutions against the priest and the king have led us.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Elisée Reclus
Anarchy and the Church
1900

Retrieved on March 9, 2025 from
https://fr.m.wikisource.org/wiki/L%E2%80%99Anarchie_et_l%E2%80%99C3%89glise

theanarchistlibrary.org