Some Thoughts on Anarchism and Religion

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The major figures in the development of what might be called "classical anarchism"—Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Michael Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin, and Errico Malatesta, among others—were very hostile to religion. They saw religion as a major support of the oppressive and corrupt orders of society they wished to overthrow and considered the religious feelings of the vast majority of the workers, peasants, and other lower class people to be a major characteristic of their oppressed, benighted condition. Doing away with religion, both the established churches and the religious feelings of the people, was thus a crucial element in their struggle to create a truly free, non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian society. These founding fathers of anarchism shared their anti-religious beliefs with the Marxists, with whom they were otherwise at odds, and this anti-religious sentiment has become a major characteristic of contemporary anarchism, Marxism, and much of the left in general.

Not all of the seminal figures in the development of anarchist thought shared this view. The great Russian writer, Leo Tolstoy, was an exception. After undergoing an intense religious experience about the time he finished his novel, *Anna Karenina*, he developed his own, very personal brand of anarchism. Tolstoy's anarchism rested on two major foundations. One was a political philosophy of thorough-going pacifism, non-violence, and non-cooperation with evil, including governments, which inspired Mohandas Gandhi, among others. The other was an intense religious conception, elaborated in many books and pamphlets (including, *A Confession, The Kingdom of God Is Within You, The Gospel in Brief, The Wisdom of Humankind, Walk in the Light* and *Twenty-three Tales*, and the novel, *Resurrection*). Tolstoy's religion was founded of a belief in what he saw as the underlying truth or essence of early Christianity, freed of its rites and rituals and what he considered to be its "metaphysical elements," such as the Trinity and the Resurrection. He also felt that this truth was shared by all the major religions of humanity; in other words, that underneath the theological trappings of the great religions lay a common truth: the spiritual unity of all humankind.

Despite this exception (and others), modern anarchism on the whole has been atheistic, and militantly so. Not only does is eschew any belief in a divinity and an afterlife, it also believes that an essential task of anarchists is to combat religious ideas and beliefs among the people. In other words, it is not enough to be an atheist; it is also essential to struggle to convince others—if possible, everybody—to be atheists too.

This militant atheist position was/is motivated by a variety of opinions and arguments. For the purposes of discussion, and at the risk of simplification, I have segregated these arguments into distinct components.

1. The fundamental notion of anarchist atheism—as of all atheism—is that there is no god: God does not exist, and the idea that there is a god is false, a myth, a delusion. If the people are to free themselves, as anarchists propose, it is essential that they understand the truth—about themselves, about the society they live in, and about the world/universe. In the view of anarchist atheism, myths and delusions work to keep people oppressed. Conversely, having real knowledge, that is, realizing the truth, is a crucial prerequisite of self-liberation. Since it is true that there is no god, people need to recognize this if they are to be free.

2. Religion is not scientific. The anarchists, like the Marxists, saw themselves and their theory as scientific. Specifically, they sought to base their ideas of the revolutionary transformation of society on what they believed to be a scientific understanding of the world, society, history, and human beings. Science is based on reason and submits its hypotheses, theories, and methods to systematic testing. Religion, in contrast, is based primarily on faith, not reason: one chooses to believe in God and to entertain other religious ideas that, almost by definition, cannot be demonstrated, tested, corroborated, or proven. A central part of the struggle of anarchists is the struggle for reason. The liberated society, to the anarchist thinkers, represents the triumph of reason, and the complete triumph of reason entails the elimination/destruction of non-rational beliefs, such as superstition and religion.

3. The very idea of God, of a deity, at least in the major monotheistic religions, is inherently authoritarian. God is the creator of the universe. He is all-powerful and all-knowing: he sees all and knows all, including what we are all thinking. (and in these religions, he is a he, not a she). This notion of an omnipotent and omniscient god is authoritarian: God is Authority; he is the ultimate Boss, the ultimate King, and it is everybody's duty to obey him, on pain of everlasting damnation. According to the anarchists, belief in God tends to create and to reinforce authoritarian modes of thought and behavior among the people: obedience is blessed, good; defiance—rebellion, revolution—is sin, bad.

4. Because of its authoritarian nature, religion, certainly the organized churches, encourages people to be dependent on authority for their ideas, not only concerning questions of religion, but also concerning those of morality and politics. Members of ecclesiastical hierarchies, from parish priest or minister on up, tend to have great authority in religious communities, discouraging independent, let alone radical and revolutionary, ideas.

5. Religion has almost invariably been a prop of class society. Throughout history, religious institutions have sought to strengthen themselves by allying with the ruling classes and institutions of class/ authoritarian societies and, at the same time, defending those classes and institutions from revolt from below. For their part, the ruling powers have legitimized and protected themselves from internal and external threats by clothing themselves in religious garb and by supporting religion and the major churches. Religion has thus been an integral part of the authoritarian, hierarchical structure of class societies. In fact, the

churches have often been among the most reactionary forces within the specific societies of which they are a part, setting themselves in opposition to all change, even to relatively mild reforms that represent little or no threat to the social systems they are defending.

6. Religion tells people not to fight for their freedom here and now. Salvation, according to most religious dogmas, is not to be sought in the present and in the material world, but "beyond" this world, either in an after-life, as in Christianity and Islam, at the "end of time," as in messianic Judaism, or in some sort of blessed state that exists— and that a devoted few might reach—outside of our usual conceptions of time and space, as in Buddhism and other eastern religions. As a result, religion has served to give people a false sense of comfort and solace, some sense of fulfillment, under oppressive social conditions, rather than urging them to eliminate those conditions by overthrowing the social system that gives rise to them. Religion, in sum, dulls the pain of people's oppressed condition and blunts their struggle to end it. If, in contrast, people were to realize that this is the only world there is and this the only life they have, they would be much more likely to struggle to improve their lives in the here and now. It was in this sense that Karl Marx referred to religion as the "opiate of the people."

7. Religion lends itself to fanaticism, the desire to impose one's ideas on others by force. Since religious beliefs are not testable, they are not responsive to ordinary logic and to argument. They are accepted on faith and as The Truth, that is, as absolutely true. Moreover, religious ideas deal with, and claim to answer, fundamental metaphysical questions, such as morality and the salvation of individuals and all humanity. They also tend to be passed along by, and to be dependent on, authority, (priests, tradition, dogma, etc.). As a result of these (and perhaps other) characteristics of religion, many religious individuals, seeking security in an often frightening world, develop literalist, fundamentalist, and militant approaches to their faiths. If our beliefs are True, this type of thinking goes, it is true for everybody and in all times and places. And if this is so, it is our duty to force others to accept our beliefs, or failing this, to compel them to live under the strictures of our religion.

There may be other components of the militant atheism of classical anarchism, but I believe these points cover most of them. While I believe there is some truth in many of these arguments, I also think they present a simplistic and one-sided understanding of religion and of anarchism's relation to it.

Personally, I am an atheist. I do not believe there is a god or an after-life. I believe that what we have here, this one life, this one planet, is all we have, the only chance we get. But I am also aware that atheism is a belief, something I choose to believe, not something that can be proved. At least in this sense, my atheism is philosophically equivalent to a religious belief. I can no more prove that there isn't a god than a believer can prove that there is one. This puts my conception of atheism in a different position than that of the anarchist founders.

The founding fathers of anarchism believed that their atheism was qualitatively different from religious beliefs. As I mentioned, they believed their atheism was based on reason rather than on faith. Even more, they understood their atheism to be supported, and thus proved, by science. But this is a profound misunderstanding of what science is, what its methods are, and what it believes. Science is naturalistic and non-theistic. It seeks explanations of natural phenomena by looking for them within nature and rejects and excludes from consideration all explanations based on

God or other super- or extranatural causes. This follows from its insistence that its hypotheses, theories, and explanations be subject to some type of empirical demonstration, verification, corroboration, or proof. (Some philosophers, such as Karl Popper, insist that truly scientific theories be "falsifiable," that is, able to be disproved.) Since, by definition, the existence or actions of God or other supra-natural phenomena cannot be empirically demonstrated—proved or disproved—hypotheses and theories based on them are, a priori, excluded from consideration as scientific explanations. In this (very narrow) sense, science is atheistic. But science does not go beyond this. It does not assert, either as scientific fact or as philosophical truth, that there is no God, and, therefore, that all religions are false. Within its purview, science rejects religious, superstitious, metaphysical, and other non-testable theories, hypotheses, and explanations. But outside its realm, science takes no position on religion or religious beliefs. This is why today there are so many scientists who are religious, and why so many seminal figures in the history of science, including such eminent scientists as Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein, were also religious. (Einstein's religious beliefs were rather attenuated, much like the Deism of some of the figures of the Enlightenment or the philosophy of Baruch/Benedict Spinoza. In contrast, Newton's religious views tended toward the bizarre and were, in fact, close to mysticism.) While these men's religious ideas did affect their approach to science, influence their theories, and motivate their efforts, their theories were/are logically independent of those beliefs. In other words, whatever their origins (which might, in fact, be religious in inspiration), scientific hypotheses and theories are testable outside of any and all religious considerations. This is one of the reasons why science has been so successful. In a world plagued by national, racial, ethnic, religious, political, and ideological tensions, this characteristic of science makes possible—indeed, it almost forces—the cooperation of thousands of people across those divisions. This is something the fathers of anarchism did not clearly recognize.

It is understandable that early anarchist theorists would believe that science itself is hostile to religion. Prior to the development of modern science, the vast majority of explanations of natural phenomena entertained by human beings were superstitious, religious, mystical. (I am excluding the naturalistic beliefs of a handful of philosophers.) In those times (that is, most of human history), virtually all people were superstitious and/or religious, and their explanations of why things happened were, naturally, superstitious and/or religious ones. If a plague wiped out millions of people, this was because God/the gods were angry, or because of the actions of the Devil or other evil forces or beings. Conversely, if the harvests were good, this was because God or the gods were pleased. It was therefore inevitable that as modern science, with its purely naturalistic/ non-theistic explanations of natural phenomena, developed, beginning in the 15th century and onward, it challenged many, perhaps even most, of the specific tenets—the dogma and theology—of organized religion, and threatened religious conceptions of life and of the universe in general. As a result, it was also inevitable that, for their part, the forces of organized religion would see science as a threat and fight against it, struggling to stem the tide and to circumscribe science's influence. But, for a variety of reasons, not least of which was science's success in transforming human society, the advance of science was unstoppable. Over time, science and its offshoots, technology and the Industrial Revolution, led to the increasing secularization of social and intellectual life, that is, to the drastic reduction of the influence of religion and the power of the churches throughout society. This was a process that began in Western Europe and has since spread, not without resistance, around the world. As this process picked up steam during the 19th and early 20th centuries, it was logical to assume: (1) that science was inevitably hostile to all religious conceptions; and (2) that the process of secularization would, or at least should, be carried out to its logical conclusion—the complete elimination of religion.

But, as it turned out, the process of secularization has not progressed to its logical conclusion. This is not only because of the continued power and resistance of organized religion and the ignorance and thick-headedness of believers, as some atheists believe. It is also and primarily because religion speaks to, and satisfies, deep psychological needs in human beings, needs that science does not and cannot fulfill.

Science does not, cannot, and does not pretend to, answer all questions. One big area that it does not and cannot address is the question of Meaning—the meaning of our existence, the meaning of the universe, and the meaning of humanity. All science can do is to accept that fact that the universe and we do exist and to attempt to explain how it/we work, how it/we evolved, and how it/we may develop in the future. But it cannot address, positively or negatively, the "why" of our existence, why the universe came into existence, why it is the way it is, why humanity exists, and what purpose, if any, it/we may have. Taken by itself, science implies that our existence is meaningless; we just happened.

Yet, the vast majority of people in the world today, and as far as anyone knows throughout the existence of humanity, have had a great deal of difficulty living in a world without meaning. The idea that the universe, humanity, and our individual lives have no intrinsic meaning—that we just are, that we just live our lives and then die—is terrifying. Why exist, why get up in the morning, why work, why struggle to survive, why create art, why do anything, if it is all meaningless? And throughout our history, human beings have sought to give our existence and the existence of the universe some sense of significance, of meaning. And for most people, religion supplies this sense of meaning about our lives and about the world.

Another psychological need that science, at least for most people, does not fulfill is the need to feel part of something larger than ourselves. Human beings are social animals. The vast majority of us (there are a few hermits in the world) live, work, play, and reproduce in groups—families, clans, tribes, communities, nations, societies. As physically unimpressive animals (compared to other beasts), we need to cooperate with each other in order to survive. As psychologists, neuroscientists, and others have learned and are still discovering, the structures that enable and encourage us to live in groups are deeply embedded in the evolution and in the biological/psychological structure of human beings. Among other things, this drive to cooperate is mediated through our emotions, which, in turn, are mediated through various hormones (primarily, oxytocin) that we produce and which circulate throughout our bodies. At the most basic level, we develop strong emotional attachments to other human individuals and groups: mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and other relatives, wives and husbands, people with whom we work, play, and socialize, etc. As part of this, we have a deepseated psychological need to feel connected to others, to "belong."

But this need to belong, to feel a connection to something, does not end with other human beings. We bond with, feel emotional attachments to, other animals, such as our pets, and to our homes, to our possessions, to the physical regions in which we live, to the religious communities and ethnic groups of which we are a part, to our countries, to the Earth, etc. At the broadest level, most people have a need to feel part of the universe as a whole, the cosmos. Following from this, they want the universe to be warm and comforting, rather than cold and indifferent. Religion, which for most believers has a deep emotional content, has long served both to reinforce the social bonds among people and to express and satisfy our desires to feel ourselves to belong to a kind, comforting universe, rather than just existing in a heartless cosmic void.

Beyond the two psychological needs we have discussed, there is a third. This is the need to feel that our lives do not really end when we die, that somehow we, or some essence of ourselves, lives on after our deaths. This need is connected to the others. Most people want their lives to have some sort of meaning, at least to the people we are emotionally close to, but also, if possible, to the society in which we live, and to the universe as a whole. Virtually by definition, this meaning lasts, and must last, beyond the time of our actual physical existence, in our families', friends', and co-workers' memories, and in the memory of the universe (if it has one). We want to feel that our presence on the planet has been significant, has "made a difference." This need to believe in the continued existence of some essence of ourselves after we are physically gone is thus fueled by the same powerful emotional drives (and by the same hormones) as our need to belong.

The fact that religion satisfies such deep-felt needs of human beings helps to explain why it remains so important in the world today. It also explains why evidence of religion and of religious ideas can be found very early in the history of humanity. From early archaeological finds, our own species, Homo Sapiens, shows evidence of a belief in an after-life: our ancestors buried their dead with various objects, suggesting that they believed the dead had some sort of existence beyond the grave. Thus, religion existed long before the emergence of class society, and is thus far more than simply a tool of ruling elites to bamboozle the masses and to shore up class society, as some simplistic leftist theories imply. Religion has been, and is likely to remain, for good or bad, a fundamental characteristic of our species.

I believe that the ultimate source of religion lies in the development of symbolic thought— thinking in terms of symbols— that has been so fundamental in the development of humanity and of human culture. It is through symbols that the notion of meaning entered the world. A symbol is something that stands for, or represents, that is, means, something else. The main example, and probably the origin, of symbolic thought is language. For those who speak English, the word "cat," for example, represents a certain object, an animal with fur, whiskers, and claws, that purrs, meows, hunts, and behaves in certain other ways. The sound of the word "cat" has no logical connection to the concept; it is a convention. While the sounds of a few words in most languages may have some obvious, logical connection to the object or idea they represent, the vast majority do not. By some kind of process that occurred over time, these sounds have come to represent certain objects, ideas or concepts. They are symbols of the things they represent. The symbols "mean" the objects they stand for.

Language came into existence as a result of the need for human beings to cooperate, to work together. As I mentioned, the physical prowess of an individual human being is very limited; compared to other animals, we are slow and weak. One individual hunter set against most wild animals, certainly the large ones, would have little chance of killing them or protecting him/herself against them. But human beings make up for our physical weakness by uniting with others and working together. Our real strength lies in cooperation, working together toward a common goal, such as securing food or defense against attack. And crucial to such cooperation is communication. Many animals communicate in some way or another. Even relatively solitary animals communicate; for example, a rattlesnake shakes its tail to warn predators away. But communication is particularly important in the lives of social animals, those that live and work in groups. These animals, including such insects as bees and ants, must communicate with each other if they are to survive and reproduce. For example, forager bees, the members of a hive that go out looking for sources of food, must be able to communicate to the rest of the hive where the source of food is if the hive is to survive. And they do so by "dancing", that is, by wiggling their abdomens and walking in certain patterns that indicate to the other bees where—in what direction and how far away—a particular food source is. This is a form of language. Other social animals, such as the great apes, elephants, the cetaceans (whales and dolphins), wolves, birds, etc., communicate, and have even more developed languages.

But humanity, for a variety of reasons, developed this ability to communicate— this ability to create and to utilize language—far beyond the relatively rudimentary level of other animals. Indeed, elaborate language, along with opposing thumbs and the ability to walk upright, is virtually a defining characteristics of what it means to be human. But the development of language both entailed and made possible the tremendous expansion of symbolic thought. (In a crucial sense, it made conscious thought possible.) This symbolic thought is the root of all human culture, including art—music, literature, the graphic arts—and religion; in fact, from its earliest stages, religion was integrally connected to the arts, and often provided, and still provides, profound inspiration to artists around the world. Religion itself is symbolic. In all its forms, it is a symbolic representation of the universe, a kind of picture or image of its origins, of the various forces that inhabit it and drive it, and of human beings' place in it. It is an elaborate, imaginative, and colorful attempt to make sense of the universe, to discover meaning in it.

My point here is that religion developed as a result of, and parallel to, the development of symbolic/abstract thought among human beings, and that the search for meaning and the need to find it, that is, the driving emotional force behind religion, is, along with language, a fundamental characteristic of human beings, a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human.

This need to find meaning in the universe and in our existence continued to exist even after the secularization of society was well underway. This not only explains the continued existence of religion. It also explains the emergence of secular ideologies in the last two hundred years or so. By "secular ideologies," I mean sets of beliefs that address questions of our modern political and social life. Examples include liberalism, conservatism, nationalism, socialism, communism, and anarchism. These ideologies began to develop in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and received perhaps their greatest impetus in the period during and after the French Revolution.

These ideologies are belief systems, "worldviews," that represent plans or programs for society, that is, ideas about how to improve, change (or not change), our economic, social, and political existence. Although these ideologies are not religious, per se (some, as we know, are explicitly hostile to religion), they share many of the same characteristics and structures as religion, fulfill many of the same social and emotional needs that religion does, and owe some of their most fundamental ideas to religion. In some senses, they are direct descendents of religious beliefs.

First, as I've stressed, these ideologies are not scientific; they cannot be demonstrated, corroborated, proved or even tested. This is because they all rest on sets of philosophical/metaphysical assumptions, ideas about the nature of the universe, of the Earth, of human beings, human society, and human history, etc., that are not capable of scientific demonstration. Because of this, these ideologies are really accepted "on faith," much as religion is; people choose to believe them for a variety of reasons, only some of which are rational.

Second, these world-views satisfy many of the same psychological needs as religion. Among other things, insofar as these belief systems are embodied in social movements, they offer its proponents a sense of connection to other people, a sense of belonging. Probably most important, they provide a sense of meaning, a way of conceiving/making sense of the world, particularly of our place in it, and offer a sense of purpose, a direction and a meaning, to the lives of the holders of these beliefs. They also provide a way for people to have an impact on the world, to "make a difference," and hence have their memories live on past their deaths.

Finally, these ideologies have borrowed many of their fundamental ideas from religion. For one thing, they usually represent some sort of plan for human society, some sort of notion of what human society should be, what it should look like, how human beings should behave, etc. In not so many words, they represent ideas of what "God's will" is, what he intends for human beings. In fact, many ideologies, particularly the conservative ones, make explicit appeals to God and what he (allegedly) wants.

But even the progressive ideologies, including those that claim to be atheistic, have borrowed crucial tenets from religion. At their most basic level, these ideologies start from a belief in the moral equality of human beings. "All men are created equal…" reads the second paragraph of the United States' Declaration of Independence. This (broadened to explicitly include women, members of all racial/ ethnic groups, those of different sexual orientations, etc.) is the underlying assumption of all progressive ideologies, all those worldviews that look toward the (gradual or abrupt) improvement of society. But the idea of moral equality is religious in origin. It came into exist with the development of monotheism, first, with ancient Judaism, and later, with Christianity and Islam. It derives from the notion of a single god who is the creator of the universe: all his creatures (particularly, the humans) are said to be equal in his eyes. This did not mean they are equal in physical and mental endowments. This is obviously not the case: concretely, some are big, some are small, some weak, some strong, some healthy, some sickly, some intelligent, some not. What it means is something deeper, more abstract, but also more basic: it means of equal worth. This is a moral idea, and only has meaning in the context of morality, of a moral code, a code of conduct meant to be valid for all human beings.

This idea of the equal worth of all human beings and of the morality it was based on did not exist in the pagan religions. For any given pagan religion, its gods were the gods of its people; its tribe, city state, empire; the gods of Sparta, Athens, Rome, etc. Under these religions, there was no morality in the modern sense of the word, no moral code that was meant to apply to people of all tribes, cities, classes, nations. Instead, there were sets of customs, traditions, and values about what specific members of the tribe, city, class, nation, etc., were expected to be and how they were expected to behave. The Greeks and Romans, for example, did not believe in the moral equality of all people.

They believed they were superior, civilized, and everybody else was inferior, barbarian. The latter were accorded no rights whatsoever, they had no place in the customary codes: they could be killed, enslaved, tortured, etc. Moreover, even within Greek or Roman society, not all were of equal worth. An aristocrat had greater worth, and was expected to behave in different ways, than commoners or foreigners.

With Judaism, and then Christianity and Islam, a new idea comes into existence: the notion that all human beings, regardless of origin, regardless of personal endowments, are of equal worth, and, what followed from this, have, at least implicitly, equal rights. This was a revolutionary idea. But virtually from the beginning, this revolutionary notion was compromised in various ways. Among the Jews, it was compromised, first and foremost, by the idea that the Jews constitute God's "chosen people," that they have a special relationship to God, a "covenant" with him, that he had singled them out for special favor. (He also held them to higher standards than he did the rest of his “children.”) This was a legacy of the tribal origins of Judaism, that originally YHWH was, first and foremost, the god of the Israelite tribes.

The idea of the moral equality of humans was also compromised by the monotheistic religions in yet other ways. One was the idea that believers, that is, those that accept the tenets of the particular religion are held in higher esteem than non-believers or heretics; indeed, believers may be saved; non-believers or heretics will be damned. These religions also countenanced unjust social institutions, such as slavery, and oppressive social and political regimes in general. Nevertheless, the idea of the moral equality of all human beings remained as a powerful undercurrent in these religions and in the societies where these religions dominated, often serving as motivation and inspiration for movements for reform, for revolts, and for revolutions. And it is this idea that is the cornerstone of the progressive secular ideologies, including, and in particular, the revolutionary ones. It’s what motivates our desire to build a truly just world, a world without oppression, without social classes and other hierarchies. Socialism/communism/anarchism is in fact our demand that the logic of the notion of the moral equality of human beings—a religious idea in origin—be made real, in this world.

The revolutionary secular ideologies are indebted to religion for another of their fundamental ideas. This is the belief that the truly free, just society will come about through some sort of abrupt event, a relatively quick radical transformation of society, in other words, a revolution. This is just a secular version of the apocalyptic visions of ancient Judaism and Christianity. Originally posed by the ancient Jews, this represented the coming of the Messiah, a God-anointed military leader/king, who would unite the Jews, lead them in battle against their enemies, restore the Jews to their ancient homeland, rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem and establish a truly just society in the “promised land”, which in turn would lead to the creation of God’s kingdom on Earth, a truly free and just society throughout the world. This idea was taken over by the early Christians, who saw the Messiah not as a military leader arriving in splendor on a bejeweled chariot, but as Yoshuah (Jesus, in Greek), the embodiment (the Son) of God in a humble carpenter, whose return, after his crucifixion and resurrection, would also bring about God’s kingdom on Earth. Although many socialists, communists, and anarchists might find this hard to accept, our idea of a (“socialist,” “communist,” “social”) revolution that will do away with unjust and oppressive social systems forever and establish a global society based on true equality and heart-felt cooperation is just a non-religious version of the apocalyptic visions of the monotheistic religions.

Thus, two of the most basic ideas of anarchism, as of revolutionary socialism and Marxism/Communism, are religious in origin. Without religion, these ideas, and the secular ideologies based on them, would not exist.

With all this is mind, we can see what is either wrong or one-sided in the anti-religious beliefs of the early anarchists thinkers.

For one thing, while those of us who are atheists may believe there is no god, we cannot, as I’ve stressed above, prove this. The non-existence of God is not a provable proposition, anymore than its opposite, the assertion that God does exist, is provable. In this sense, our atheism and other people’s religious beliefs are equivalent. They are something we choose to believe.

The fact that science does not accept religious or other non-naturalist ideas as valid scientific explanations does not prove that atheists are correct, that atheism is scientific, or that science is atheistic. As I discussed, science is non-theistic, not atheistic. It takes, and can take, no position on the existence of God. It merely excludes theistic arguments/explanations from its purview.

Since such an existence (or non-existence) cannot be tested in any scientific way, science takes no position on the matter. Religion is outside its realm.

By the same token, a belief in anarchism, in the possibility and desirability of an egalitarian, democratic, and cooperative society, is not scientific. It cannot be scientifically proved, demonstrated or tested. It certainly can be advocated, utilizing reasonable/ rational arguments, and adducing evidence that may be scientifically verifiable, but it itself is not scientifically demonstrable. As in the case for the existence of God, any argument in favor of anarchism, any argument about why anarchism is possible, desirable or necessary, can be countered with arguments against it. The belief that anarchism is somehow scientific, like the Marxists' belief that Marxism is scientific, is false, and represents a profound misunderstanding of what science is, does, and can do. Thus, while it is true that religion is not scientific, it is not true that anarchism is.

It is also not the case that all religious beliefs are inherently or entirely authoritarian. In fact, many pagan religions are/were not invariably authoritarian, which may be one of the reasons why some anarchists consider themselves to be pagans. In many of these religions, there is no all-powerful, all-seeing God, the Boss of the universe. While there may be a creator god, he/she/ it might not be all-powerful. Moreover, there may be a variety, indeed, a plethora, of gods, who have minds and wills of their own or who may be in conflict with one another, including with the creator.

On the other hand, it is certainly the case that the monotheistic religions, with their belief in an omnipotent and omniscient god, have a deeply authoritarian thrust. But this is only one side of the picture. As I discussed above, these religions also comprise values and beliefs that have radical— indeed, revolutionary—implications. Specifically, the idea that all human beings have an equal moral worth, are equal in the sight of God, entails a profound, de facto revolutionary critique of all unjust social and economic conditions. "If we are equal in the sight of God, why aren't we equal in this world, the world God made? Why are we slaves, serfs, oppressed workers? Why don't we have the same rights as white people, men, heterosexuals, etc?" This is why, in addition to helping to prop up unjust societies and justify oppressive social conditions, religion has also served as an inspiration to millions of people throughout history in struggles for their rights and their freedom, from peasant revolts in the Middle Ages, to revolutions in England, North America, and France, to the struggles of the Abolitionists to do away with Black slavery and the civil rights movement in the United States, to Liberation Theology in Latin America and elsewhere. Despite the secularization of society, religion continues to provide this inspiration to millions of people throughout the world. It is perhaps easy to focus on the reactionary role of religion in political and social events in the world today; on fundamentalist Christian churches and their preachers; on the Catholic Church hierarchy, with its opposition to birth control, abortion rights, and gay rights; on the fundamentalist varieties of Islam, with their commitment to medieval legal codes and their reactionary attitudes toward women. But we must not overlook the fact that millions of people who oppose these reactionary religious forces are also religious, and are often deeply inspired by their beliefs.

Nor must we forget that it is not just religion that lends itself to fanatical modes of thought and behavior. If religion, per se, were the prime cause of extremism, one would expect atheists to be free of such diseases. But how then does one explain the fanatical behavior of militant atheists when they have had the opportunity to run societies? I am thinking here of the Marxists, organized in their Communist Parties, who in the 20th century seized state power in Russia, the countries of Eastern Europe, China, Vietnam, and Cuba, and tried to impose their ideas with all the legal and coercive power at their disposal: prisons, torture, labor camps, psychiatric hospitals, executions, etc. They ran their own—atheistic—inquisitions, rivaling, if not surpassing, anything the Catholic Church ever attempted. It would seem, then, that it is not religion per se that is the cause of such extremist, fanatical behavior, but something else, some set of not-yet-described totalitarian psychosocial drives and thought processes, some tendency of symbolic thought that lends itself to be taken to its logical extreme.

It may certainly be the case that, since religious beliefs are not scientific, people choose or accept particular religious beliefs for nonrational, even authoritarian, reasons. For example, a person may believe in a certain religion and choose to join a particular church because he/she was born into it, because his/her family believed in it, because he/she came under the sway of an influential individual who convinced/persuaded him/her to join, or because he/she may have undergone a profound emotional experience, or because of a combination of nonrational motives. But the same arguments may be made about believing in anarchism, Marxism or any other set of non-provable beliefs. Many believers in anarchism or Marxism come to their beliefs at a young age. Many of them are born into families that share such beliefs, or become convinced to be anarchists or Marxists because they come under the influence of an individual, often an older one, with a strong personality, or because they undergo profound experiences. How many people have considered themselves to be Marxists and have joined Marxist organizations before they read Marx's Capital? (Indeed, how many Marxists have ever read Capital, let alone understood it?) How many people have become anarchists before they have read much of the writings of the anarchists, or even before they have read very much or know very much at all? People decide to believe in political ideologies and to join political groups for all sorts of reasons, many of them the same that lead other people to believe in religions and to become members of churches and other religious groups. In fact, the reasons people choose to believe in political ideologies and to join political groups are much the same as the reasons people choose to adhere to religions, and they are not inevitably more rational.

Moreover, the structure of political beliefs, even anarchistic beliefs, are not inherently more rational and less authoritarian than religious beliefs. Certainly many Marxists, and many anarchists, accept many ideas essentially from authority. Many Marxists talk about capitalism, imperialism, socialism, constant and variable capital, the falling rate of profit, etc., before they have anything more than the most rudimentary understanding of these terms. They learned them through limited reading, or through taking classes, or through participating in a study group. They may, and often do, accept and argue for them without doing serious reading, study, and investigation at all. (Who has time when there is so much to do?) And even when one does carry out an in-depth investigation of these questions, there is always a point at which one chooses to accept a certain set of ideas or to reject them, if only because most of these are issues are not subject to scientific proof, because there is no scientific consensus about their validity. Moreover, this choice is always influenced by personal and emotional factors, that is, by other than purely rational considerations. The same is true of anarchists. Indeed, it is rather disturbing to me to see young anarchists sporting Che Guevara T-shirts when they have hardly any idea of who Che was, what he did, or what he believed. All they (usually) know is that he was a revolutionary who co-led the Cuban revolution and who died trying to make a revolution in Bolivia (and that he was very good-looking). They don't know that he was not an anarchist, or anything remotely like an anarchist, but, on the contrary, was a Stalinist, an extreme authoritarian, in his political beliefs. But I understand why this happens, which is because people, including anarchists, choose their political beliefs in a variety or ways, in ways that are not inherently different from the ways those people who are religious choose their religious beliefs.

All this is why, to me, it is not a crucial question whether an individual is religious or not. What I prefer to know is what kind of person she/he is, how she/he treats other people, how she/he acts in the world today, what she/he believes is her/his responsibility to other human beings and toward the Earth. I have no interest in trying to convince people to be atheists. In general, I expect I would feel much closer, politically and emotionally, to a religious anarchist (or even to a religious liberal) than to an atheistic authoritarian.

This is also why I do not think anarchists should include atheism as a part of their political programs. We should be seeking to build organizations—of whatever kind they may be—by uniting people who hold common sets of values and common ideas of what kind of social changes we seek and how we seek to bring them about. More specifically, we should not exclude people from our organizations merely because they may be religious. Quite the contrary, where such religious people otherwise agree with us, we should encourage their participation and membership in our activities and organizations.

I also believe that the understanding of religion that I am advocating implies a different attitude toward people we are trying to reach and to organize. The attitude of many, if not most, atheist leftists toward people who are religious is usually very elitist. They believe that they, the atheists, know the truth, while people who are religious believe in myths, in other words, are duped. But, in fact, we atheists don't know the truth; we think we know the truth, which is different. If we were to fully recognize that our atheist beliefs are not scientific and cannot be proven, we would have a different attitude toward those who are religious. Just because individuals may be religious does not mean they are somehow backward, ignorant, misguided or uninformed. We should certainly try to convince them of our understanding of human society and of what needs to be done to save it.

But we should respect their beliefs, and approach this discussion in a spirit of equality, not from a false sense of superiority based on the conviction that we have a greater claim to understanding the Truth.

This does not mean that we should not see religious fundamentalism or extremism as the threat it is. But we should also recognize that it is not just religion that lends itself to extremist, absolutist, thinking. As became apparent in the societies ruled by Marxists, extremist (fundamentalist) atheism is just as dangerous.

We all have our own mythologies. We all live in our own (overlapping) worlds of symbolic representations of reality and have our unique ways of making sense of our lives and of the world we live in. We should respect and value the differences in these symbolic worlds, not try to stamp them out in favor of some kind of (in fact, unachievable) gray atheistic unity.

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