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ANARCHISM AND RELIGION

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Anarchism is first and foremost a disposition (Oakeshott 1962, 168). To be an anarchist is to be disposed to think and behave in certain ways; to prefer certain kinds of conduct and conditions; to make certain choices (Graeber 2009; Chomsky 2005; Scott 2012; Fiala 2018). Although anarchists embrace different policies, contradict each other and occasionally themselves, the disposition is in all cases the same. To be of an anarchist disposition is to be defiant of authorities and exercises of power, to reject hierarchical relationships and institutions, to be suspicious of established ways and conventional morality. Anarchists are sceptical of social norms and prefabricated rules of action. Instead, they insist on universal freedom and equality and put their faith in self-help and self-organization. Anarchists are followers of Groucho, not Karl, Marx. An anarchist political party is a contradiction in terms, and even the notion of an “ideology” is probably too constraining. The quintessential anarchist party is a flash mob, and its ideology is best spray-painted on city walls (Vaneigem 1967; Debord 1994).

The state is the traditional enemy of all anarchists. The reason is the state’s claim to sovereignty and the associated insistence on a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. Sovereignty means that the state is above the law, but if that is the case, anarchists point out, no one is in a position to legitimately challenge it, and dissent is turned into a crime. Right-wing anarchists reject the state’s right to regulate the behaviour of individuals, and they object to paying taxes – “taxation is theft.” Instead, they insist on the right of individuals to make their own decisions. Economic markets are crucial here since they allow individual choices to be coordinated in a decentralized fashion. Left-wing anarchists, on the other hand, insist that power is illegitimately exercised not only by the state but also by markets. Since economic power is unevenly distributed, workers and consumers are exploited, and only a small minority gets rich – “property is theft” (Proudhon 1848, 1). Although left-wing anarchists share the Marxist critique of capitalism, they object strongly to the idea of a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” All dictatorships are bad, and political power should instead be vested in self-governing, egalitarian communities.

“No gods, no masters”

As far as religion is concerned, the vast majority of anarchists are scathing. Anti-religious tracts featured prominently among the writings of the first generations of anarchists, and they are written to this day. Classical pamphlets include Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s, “God Is Evil Man
Is Free” (1849), Mikhail Bakunin’s God and the State (1970), Sébastien Faure, “Douze preuves de l'inexistence de Dieu;” (1909), and Emma Goldman’s, The Philosophy of Atheism (1913) (Proudhon 1849; Bakunin 1970; Faure 1908; Goldman 1916). But there are many other texts which make the same arguments, including entries in the Encyclopédie Anarchiste (1930) (Brocher 1930; Berneri 1930; Barbedette 1930; Pelletier 1930; Blanqui and Dommanget 2009). A more recent example is De l’inhumanité de la religion (2000) by the anarchist and soixante-huitard Raoul Vaneigem (Vaneigem 2000).

Gods, anarchists explain, are if anything more detrimental to human freedom than kings since (1) their power is infinitely greater, and (2) they do not exist. In their omnipotence, gods make human beings powerless and subservient; before their majesty, there is nothing for us to do but prostrate ourselves and confess our sins. Meanwhile, their non-existence points to the existence of a widespread conspiracy. Someone or something has convinced us to believe in this mirage, no doubt because someone or something stands to benefit from our gullibility (Bakunin 1970, 16). Anarchists have taken it upon themselves to expose this hoax. Anarchist authors, that is, share in a general post-Enlightenment prejudice which sees religion as a remnant of the Dark Ages, but there is at the same time a particular vociferousness, a misotheism, to their rhetoric. By swearing in church, the anarchists believe they can jolt people out of their complacency. But in addition, blasphemy helps the anarchists assert their credentials as rabble-rousers. A number of slogans make the same point: “No gods, no masters!” “God is evil, man is free!” “If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him!” (Bakunin 1970, 28).

The biggest problem, anarchists explain, is religion’s long-standing support of political oppression. This connection can be traced back to the very first states some 12,000 years ago (Vaneigem 2000, chap. 2; Goldman 1913; 1916). The rulers of Mesopotamia were not only kings but also gods who promised good harvests in return for obedience and taxes. Their societies were as hierarchical as their ziggurats, and it was the God/king on top who was in charge. We find the same theocratic dictatorship in all early agricultural societies. The Pharaohs of Egypt were also gods, and they too controlled their societies from atop pyramids, and so did the God/kings of pre-Columbian America. In imperial China, the emperor was designated “Son of Heaven,” with a “Heavenly Mandate,” which the subjects questioned only at the pain of death. And the need for divine backing has not diminished over time. In early modern Europe, kings ruled by “divine right,” invoking biblical passages to prove that ordinary people must defer to their authority. In Protestant countries, kings made themselves heads of the Church and forced their subjects to attend regular church services, turning political disobedience into a religious crime (Olli 2008, 457–70).

A related problem is the close connection between religion and warfare. As anarchists point out, religions have always helped justify violence against foreigners (Landauer 2010b, 84–91; Ellul 1991). Religious denominations that have enjoyed the protection of the state have happily given their blessings to the state’s wars. After all, what good is a God who cannot defeat the enemies of his people? Indeed, to this day, most wars are fought “with God on our side.” And admittedly, from a sociological point of view, the connection between religion and violence is easily explained. Religion is a strong marker of identity. It is one of the easiest ways to tell people apart, especially if the practices of the religion in question make its believers stand out in some fashion. As a result, ethnic conflicts in Northern Ireland, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and more or less everywhere else, have turned into “religious conflicts.”

Another issue that anarchist authors commonly mention is the connection between religion and capitalism. Religions often encourage their followers to focus on otherworldly goods, but in practice, this only means that they are encouraged to accept injustices. Capitalism is a pre-eminent example. Capitalism exploits the many and enriches the few; anarchists insist; it under-
develops the world while undermining traditional ways of life; it raids nature for resources while destroying the environment. Marx was wrong about many things, they explain, but he was right about capitalism, and he was right about religion too, which really is “the opium of the people” (Bakunin 1970, 16; McKinnon 2005, 15–38). And if people refuse to be sedated and decide to rise up, they are told by the religious authorities that it is not for man to judge, but for God, and that justice will be found in the world to come. Baked goods will be served to us after our deaths.

In addition, religion exercises a nefarious power of its own (Goldman 1913; 1916). Religious institutions are authoritarian and repressive and require their adherents to bow their heads and live their lives in fear of divine retribution. Catholicism, in particular, has a bureaucratic structure and a hierarchical chain of command in relation to which believers are utterly helpless. Controlling access to the sacraments, the Church monopolized access to the divine, and only the sufficiently obedient qualified for its services. God’s judgement, we are always told, will be swift and merciless, and most of us are destined to burn, alternatively rot, in hell. In addition, and lowering the tone, anarchists have often reiterated traditional anticlerical talking points – priests are stupid, lazy, and often drunk, monastics are gluttons and sexually depraved, and so on. “There is no freedom until the last aristocrat is hanged with the entrails of the last priest!”4 Much the same arguments apply to other religions. Islam, for its part, literally means “submission,” and requires its adherents to practice five daily prostrations, meaning that they constantly are placed in a supplicant position. Judaism, likewise, disciplines its believers by ensnaring them in the minutia of assorted hard-to-explain rules and regulations.

Anarchists object to the very language of religion – all those disciplinarian, authoritarian tropes (Bakunin 1970). Thus the God of Christians, Jews, and Muslims is said to be not only omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, but immanent, immutable, impassable, impeccable, and so on. In Islam, God has 99 names – All-Compassionate, Most Merciful, Exalted in Might and Power, and 96 others. The Abrahamic God is sexist too – He is always a “he,” a “father,” a “master,” or “king.” Even referring to Jesus as a “shepherd” is problematic since shepherds are male and in a position of absolute power in relation to their flocks. Indeed, anarchists are likely to question even the most benign phrases. Talk of “love,” and “peace,” and “meekness,” and of how “blessed” the poor are supposed to be, is nothing but attempts to pacify us and make us forget about the upcoming revolution. The Garden of Eden, so enthusiastically reviewed in the Christian tradition, was actually a prison in which human beings were kept in a state of perpetual ignorance. Among anarchists, even Heaven has its detractors. As long as Heaven is ruled by an omnipotent God, there will be no eternal bliss (Bakunin 1970; Goldman 1913; 1916).

A question of legitimacy

It is at the same time impossible to object to power as such. There are many kinds of power, after all, and many different ways to exercise it. We generally do not object to, say, the power of love or the power of logic. And in any case, the relevant issue is not power, but whether or not power, however defined, is exercised legitimately. Legitimacy, in turn, requires a source, and all exercises of power must be authorized in some fashion. Compare what anarchists say about the state (Scott 2012, xiii–xvi). Although all states are bad, they are not all equally bad. A welfare state with democratic institutions is, for example, more legitimate than an authoritarian kleptocracy. Civil liberties and regular elections are not enough to constitute a proper democracy, an anarchist will insist, but it is still an improvement over political systems that are considerably much worse. It is consequently possible, at least in theory, to imagine a state which, if only radically reconstructed, would be legitimate also in the eyes of anarchists (Wolff 1998).
The same argument could be made in relation to religion. A distinction between power and its legitimate exercise will show that not all religions are equal, and not all of them are equally reprehensible. After all, while one God may lay claims to unlimited power, and do so with little legitimacy, another God may have more modest pretensions, and for that reason, be more palatable. For example, in a polytheistic religion, the power of each God will by logical necessity be more circumscribed than the power of a God in a monotheistic religion. Not all gods are gods of the sky, as it were, who can see everything and judge us all from the vantage point of their lofty perch. Some gods are gods of the earth. They are local gods who dwell in particular locations and enjoy only limited jurisdictions. Earth gods are in charge of certain things, at certain times, but their power apart from that is limited. And while anarchists still will reject them, they are less likely to get upset by them. In theory, we could imagine gods who are so inoffensive that even anarchists would not object to their (non)existence.

The fact that the founding generation of anarchists ignored such diversity reveals the Eurocentric bias of their thought. Their rhetoric, and their misotheism, can only be successfully applied to the Abrahamic God. There have been anarchist movements outside of Europe too, of course – in Japan, China, and throughout South America for example – but at least in the case of Asia, the anti-religious arguments have been wide off their targets (Hirsch and Van der Walt 2010; Anderson 2005; Graham 2004). The Shinto gods of Japan, for example, are quintessential gods of the earth, and Daoists in China worship “life forces” rather than gods, properly speaking. Buddhism, for its part, is an explicitly atheistic, godless religion. Buddhism and anarchism are not necessarily in contradiction with each other.

Societies also differ in the extent to which the religious institutions let themselves be used for political ends. In medieval political theory, it was common to make a distinction between “the two swords” – one sword denoting the power of the Church, the other the power of political rulers (von Gierke 1900, 9–21). The discussion among political theorists at the time concerned the relationship between the two. According to some writers, kings should be subject to the Church rather than the other way around, and that gave all the power to the Pope in Rome. The more common view, however, was that the two swords were separate and that the Church and the state ruled in their own independent spheres. This gave kings more freedom, but it also made it more difficult for them to appropriate the trappings of religion in support of their political aims.

The same issue arises in all monotheistic religions. That is, the absolute claims of God and the absolute claims of kings have to be adjudicated in some fashion. In the case of Islam, this is squarely done in favour of the divine (Crone 2005). All political authority is subject to God, and politicians who fail to acknowledge this fact are illegitimate by definition. While the first four caliphs who succeeded the Prophet were righteous and wise, all subsequent rulers have been considerably less so. Hence the calls to revive the caliphate. There is a powerful critique of the state here which anarchists have failed to fully consider. If the representatives of a religion decide that political power is an abomination in the eyes of God, invocations of the divine cannot be used to support the legitimacy of the rulers. Such a religion would be as critical of political authority as the anarchists themselves.

Religious anarchists

There are not many anarchists who are religious believers, but there are some, and this combination of commitments is intriguing (Christoyannopoulos and Apps 2017; Van Steenwyk 2012; Eller 1987; Christoyannopoulos 2006; Christoyannopoulos and Adams 2017; Walter 1991; Christoyannopoulos et al. 2017; “www.jesusradicals.com” 2020) In the minds of religious anar-
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Christians, a rejection of the power of the state is combined with an acceptance of the power of God. The power of God has legitimacy, the argument must be, which the state lacks. The question is only what the source of divine legitimacy might be. Given their instinctive scepticism of all authorities, religious anarchists are unlikely to be converted for any of the traditional reasons. Traditional sources of religious beliefs are too obviously manipulative, and unless they are caught unawares, anarchists are likely to resist them (Barclay 2002; Crone 2005; Fiscella 2009; Morris 2007). And sure enough, religious anarchists often try to undermine the traditional authorities of their own faith (Meggitt 2017). They are critical of the hierarchical nature of religious institutions and accepted rituals and suspicious also towards received interpretations and conventional beliefs.

Many religious anarchists are also struggling with ways to reinterpret passages in their sacred texts that fail to fit with their political creed. For example, the passage where Jesus tells his followers to “render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s” is not, on the face of it, supportive of an anarchist outlook (Christoyannopoulos 2013). In general, anarchist believers point out, Jesus taught in parables, and parables are open to different interpretations. We should always prefer the interpretation that gives the least comfort to people in power. And what exactly did Jesus have in mind with his constant references to “the Kingdom of God” (Meggitt 2017, 138–51)? Surely he did not envision some kind of theocratic dictatorship! Rather, say anarchist believers, the Kingdom of God is a community made up of poor and marginal people who share their religious faith, but also everything else. The Kingdom of God is the ideal anarchist community.

Given such scepticism, we may wonder why religious anarchists are religious in the first place. The only authority that could convince them, it seems, would be an authority without authority. Or rather, their faith would have to be established on some alternative basis. For a suggestion of how it could work, consider Bakunin’s argument in God and the State concerning the power of nature (Bakunin 1970). As an anarchist, you might object to the laws of nature, yet doing so will quickly identify you as a fool, and not even anarchists are likely to rally behind a cry to “repeal gravity!” The reason no one does is that the laws of nature are inescapable. But for the laws of nature, we would not live in the world where we live, and we would not be the kinds of beings we take ourselves to be (Bakunin 1970, 29–34). You can imagine religious anarchists making a similar argument. We believe, they might say, because we see God in the world around us and in the eyes of the persons we love. If God is a force of nature, we cannot deny his existence without involving ourselves in self-contradiction. But this is not, at the same time, to say that we must believe everything that the representatives of religious institutions tell us. Religious institutions are human inventions, after all, and as such, necessarily partial and flawed (Maritain 1951, 473–81). What religious anarchists end up with here, in other words, is a version of deism. They are referring to God as a life-force – something like a cornucopia from which life continuously issues forth – or perhaps as a structure that undergirds the universe. Deism, however, is not a particularly inspiring faith, and this conclusion is unlikely to win many converts.

An alternative is to base one’s faith on the legitimacy provided by direct revelation. We believe since God has revealed himself to us. We had a vision; a booming voice suddenly spoke; we felt a tangible presence. Other people may question such experiences, of course, but to us they are as real as anything we might experience. We believe in God for the same reason that we believe that roses are red and the sky is blue. As such, direct revelation has a number of subversive implications which fit nicely with an anarchist disposition. After all, if you have your own personal access to God, there is no reason to defer to either political or religious authorities. There is no need to drink bottled water, as it were, if we can drink directly from the source. Kings who say they rule by divine right are consequently blasphemers, and religious leaders who claim to
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speak in God’s name are serving false gods. For the same reason, religious anarchists will have scant regard for conventional morality, leading, in some cases, to some eccentric lifestyle choices. We are on a mission from God, so what if we walk around naked?5

Religious authorities never know quite what to do with people like this. They are difficult to dismiss. After all, even the most bureaucratic creed presupposes some form of religious experiences. And if God indeed has appeared among us and left some people to bear witness to this fact, it is difficult for religious authorities to reject them out of hand. However, accepting such prophets constitutes an obvious risk. If ordinary people have established direct access to God, they have no reason to turn to the Church, and if the Church loses its monopoly on the sacraments, it loses everything. In addition, there is also the distinct possibility that the prophets in question may be charlatans or cranks. As a result, the medieval Church had rigid criteria for how to assess visionaries and their visions (Holdsworth 1963, 141–53; Cohn 1970). Visions that were deemed false were rejected, and the visionaries persecuted; visions that were deemed true were accepted, and the visionaries incorporated into the institutional framework of the Church. The reformers of the Reformation faced the same challenge. While they too derived their legitimacy from their independent access to God, they were less than keen on other reformers who made the same claims. Martin Luther, for one, repeatedly wrote of the sin of “antinomianism” – anti-nomos referring to those who are “against the law” – and he was involved in a number of “antinomian controversies” (Hall 1990).

Every religion has believers who claim the authority of direct revelation, and most religions struggle with what to do with people like that. Judaism, for example, has had antinomian controversies of its own, with independent religious entrepreneurs who reject the authority of the Torah (Magid 2005). In Islam, Sufi mystics swirl their way to religious revelations, and they too have established their independent religious institutions; Alevi’s like to dance as well, and they prefer home-cooked ritual meals to regular mosque attendance (Karamustafa 1994). The adherents of Buddhist sects like Zen explicitly search for independent religious experiences, which effectively makes antinomianism into the religious norm (Rapp 2012; Onians 2002; Galván-Álvarez 2017, 78–123). Finally, in Hinduism, each sadhu, or holy man, goes off on his own, bringing his disciples with him. Religious anarchists highly approve of alternatives such as these, and they see direct revelation as a foundation for non-coercive forms of worship. More importantly, perhaps, direct revelation proves that God is here right now and present in our lives.

The religious community

People who claim to have received messages from God tend to attract followers, and the followers tend to create communities for themselves. Many of these communities have, at least in theory and to begin with, been ruled by entirely different principles than traditional political communities. They have often been egalitarian and democratic, and, at least in principle, without hierarchies or exploitation; there has been mutualty, self-help, and self-rule; property has been held in common, and some have even abolished traditional families, including monogamous sexual relations. For believers, this is a society designed according to religious principles, but it is also a society very close to anarchist ideals (Critchley 2009, 283).

In Europe’s Middle Ages, the most obvious examples of this kind of community were the monasteries. Renouncing the world and all worldly goods, monks and nuns devoted themselves to a life of prayer and contemplation; they owned things together, referred to each other as “brothers” and “sisters,” and so on. The monastic orders were recognized by the authorities of the Church, and as a result, they managed to defend the structure of their alternative societies. This was not the case with the sects that sprung up around various freelancing spiritual leaders.
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– the Brethren of the Free Spirit, Petrobrusians, Waldensians, Neo-Adamites, and many others (Cohn 1970). The aim of these groups was to recreate the world in the image of the revelations they had received, and this often put them in conflict with the authorities. Before long, they were excommunicated and persecuted. Such conflicts intensified with the establishment of sovereign states in early modern Europe. Now the visionaries were not only bypassing the sacraments of the Church, but also the state’s own attempts to monopolize access to the divine. After all, people who can invite God directly into their homes are unlikely to attend state-sponsored church services. These religious entrepreneurs were known as “enthusiasts” – people “filled with the spirit of God” – and enthusiasm was roundly condemned. Religious persecution brought many of these groups to the Americas, and some are still there – the Amish, Hutterites, Mennonites, Doukhobors, and a few others (Cohn 1970).

We find similar social experiments in other religions. Members of the Buddhist sangha, the monastic community, are living in poverty and brotherhood, and it was originally organized according to perfectly democratic principles (Mishra 2005, 280–92). In Hinduism, there are ashrams, religious retreats, that have turned their back on the world, including the demands of its political authorities (Skaria 2002). In Islam, some sects have drawn the conclusion that since it is next to impossible for political leaders to rule in accordance with divine law, it is better to abolish political leaders altogether (Crone 2000, 9–11). Thus, the Mu’tazilites and Kharijites in ninth-century Basra, in southern Iraq, accepted that while a righteous ruler one day may emerge, it is in the meantime better if the community can rule itself (Crone 2000, 12–19).

However, in practice, many of these communities were never all that close to anarchist ideals. Some were always guided by different principles, and many fell away from their high-minded principles over the course of time. For one thing, as spoken to by God, the leaders of the congregations would always have a privileged position in relation to regular members, and in some cases, the groups turned into personality cults. Egalitarian and democratic principles were difficult to live up to, and property was not held in common; sexual exploitation and mistreatment of members were institutionalized. And if nothing else, as their size and wealth increased over time, the sects grew increasingly bureaucratic. Large organizations need structures, formal rules, and chains of command. While these patterns are obvious in the case of Christian sects, the same patterns recur in other religions. Sufi sects are run by religiously inspired leaders who have tended to pass their positions on to their children, creating what in effect is a religious aristocracy (Karamustafa 1994). Buddhist and Hindu sects, with their master/disciple structure, are hierarchical by definition, and whatever equality that exists can exist only among the masters. But even here, distinctions are made – between masters of different rank and level of spiritual achievements. In Buddhism and Hinduism too sexual and other forms of exploitation are not unheard of.

By closing themselves off and by organizing themselves in their own fashion, independent religious communities have often had a fraught relationship with the rest of society (Cohn 1970). A badly concealed sense of superiority has antagonized outsiders, who have resented their preachiness and holier-than-thou attitude. In addition, the eschatological fantasies propagated by some sects have been premised on a Manichean division between good and evil. In the case of Christian sects, the enemy is always the Antichrist, some version of the Devil, who must be defeated before God’s kingdom can be established here on earth. The Antichrist is then associated with the enemies of the sect – the king, the established Church, but often just any outsider or marginalized group such as the Jews. In the final Armageddon, violence will purify the earth, and good will conquer evil (Critchley 2009, 283; Beavis 2004). Such self-righteous utopianism is often totalitarian and far removed from anarchist ideals.
Religious anarchists, we said, display an intriguing combination of commitments. Religious anarchists reject the power of the state while accepting the power of God. The power of God has a legitimacy, they claim, which the state lacks. And while it never is quite clear what the sources of that legitimacy might be, there is an alternative way to think about God, which solves that problem. Here anarchist thought has a contribution to make to theological debates regarding the nature of God.

What such an anarchist theology would look like is quite clear. God, the anarchist, is a God who is stripped of most of his attributes and with far fewer than 99 names to his name. Above all, this is a God who exercises no power. It is not a creator God, not a legislator God, and not a miracle worker God either. An anarchist God has no idea where the world came from and has nothing much to say regarding questions of morality. This God makes no promises that things will work out for the best in the end. However, it is not a God who suffers from theodicy related problems, and radical evil is perfectly compatible with his existence. As a consequence, an anarchist God asks for no submission and no devotion. In fact, even the word “God” is likely to make him feel uncomfortable, and in any case, the word should not be capitalized. God, the anarchist, is not a “he” either, and if it was not for the grammatical inconvenience of it, he would much prefer to be referred to as “he/she/it.” An anarchist God is entirely different, in other words, from the jealous author of the Ten Commandments or from the Allah of the Qur’an. God, the anarchist, does not mind if we fool around with other divinities. “Enjoy yourselves; we have an open relationship!”

Established religions sometimes talk about their gods in similar terms. Thus Jesus, for example, is often portrayed as an outcast and a misfit, a friend of the poor and as a poor person himself, or as a helpless human being dying on a cross. Yet, the role Jesus is playing here is only the prelude to the eventual apotheosis. Jesus is the fall guy who has to die in order for God to display his resurrectionary powers, but he is also the ultimate comeback kid who one day will make his triumphal return. In the Second Coming, everyone will be judged, and everything will be set aright. While an anarchist theology accepts the first part of this story, it rejects the second part. God, the anarchist, cannot resurrect his son, and Jesus never returns to earth. In brief, Jesus and his alleged father are both quite useless. There is nothing much they can do for us. But, one may wonder, what is the point of a God like that?

One possibility is that the anarchists’ God could serve us humans as a conversation partner (Whitehead 1978; 1927; Epperly 2011). It is good to talk; everyone needs someone to talk to, and human beings first and foremost have God. “God hears prayer,” established religions insist, but by that, they simply mean that God grants favours to those who are sufficiently supplicant in their attitude. The gods that established religions make available to us are like kings who listen to petitions presented by humble subjects. An anarchist God, by contrast, is engaging with us as an equal partner in a real conversation. He takes a genuine interest; he actually wants to hear what we have to say. “God is the great companion – the fellow-sufferer who understands” (Whitehead 1978, 351). But God, the anarchist, not only listens, but he also talks, and if we only paid proper attention for once, we would realize that he is constantly trying to communicate with us. But here, as always, in a conversation between equals, no ad hominem argumentation is allowed. We should have no patience with Godsplaining (“Feminist Dismisses Bible As ‘Godsplaining’” 2017) God, for all we know, may be wrong, or perhaps he has not thought things through properly.

God is “love” say many religions, but the love that is extended to us here is always the love granted by an authority figure. In Christianity, it is usually “our heavenly father” who is said to love “his children.” That is, the love in question always features as a part of an unequal
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relationship. But love is antithetical to all exercises of power. Try as we might, we cannot force someone to love us. But love is antithetical to market transactions too. Love is not a matter of a *quid* for a *quo*, and God does not prove his love for us by getting us stuff. Rather, God, the anarchist, loves us in a perfectly non-authoritarian fashion. Since God is love, he cannot but love us, and since his love is unconditional, he does not ask for anything in return. And since human beings were created in God’s image, we should love both God and other human beings in exactly the same way. To forget this fact is to forget who we are, and this is what it means to sin (Ellul 1991, 39).

In many religions, including Christianity in its esoteric versions, the final goal is to transcend the confines of our individual selves. God’s love, and our love for God, erase the boundaries between us and the world, between you and me, and allow us to lose ourselves in the cosmos and in the divine. To a religious anarchist, this is the ultimate renunciation of power (Landauer 2010a; Critchley 2009). It is hard work to be a particular someone, after all, and much of the hard work requires us to exercise power over ourselves, over our environment, and over other people. You are supposed to “assert yourself,” “control yourself,” “fulfil yourself,” and follow any number of similarly vapid self-help suggestions. Anarchists are not immune to such social imperatives, and in the stridency of their revolutionary fervour, they may indeed be more self-assertive than most. It is power games such as these that God, the anarchist, relieves us of. We learn to let go of ourselves, and with renunciation comes liberation. This inner quest is quite different from the political agenda which anarchists usually set for themselves, but it is something that God, the anarchist, can teach us (Landauer 2010a).

Notes

1 Thanks to Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, Jeffrey Haynes, and Yrsa Ringmar for comments and suggestions.
4 Adage ascribed to Jean Meslier, a French priest who after his death was found to have written anti-religious tracts. Cf. the mass killings of priests by anarchists during the Spanish Civil War (Preston 2012, 221–58).
5 Cf. inter alia the Communism of property and nudity of the Doukhobor community in Canada (Hardwick 1993); on anabaptism more generally, see Hill (2015); Roth and Stayer (2007).

References

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