

Letters to the Fifth Estate

Various Authors

1985

Illusion of Contact

Greetings:

The summer '84 issue of the Fifth Estate was quite good. I'm glad that Bill Kellerman and Bill McCormick put the christian anarchist position so well ["Anarchy & Christianity: An Exchange," FE #317, Summer 1984], and I'm glad that George Bradford responded in a calm and reasonable manner. But he is missing one important point.

Perhaps if anarchists didn't divide the world into "christian" and "non-christian" camps, they'd see that christian anarchism is not a contradiction in terms. I, as a person who experiences god directly (in a christian context), have much more in common with a tribal religious believer than I do with the pope. What must be addressed is the difference between mediated and unmediated spiritual experience. Quakers, Zen Buddhists, Rain Forest Pygmies, contemporary Christians who reject all authority and dead ritual, Australian aborigines: these people all have a great deal in common. Foremost is the urge to relate directly to their creator, rather than allowing a hierarchy and authority figures to feed them "god" in carefully trimmed bites.

Most religions merely give the participant the illusion of contact with god. Communion, for instance, originally a totemic feast, has been reduced to eating dry bits of bread doled out by ecclesiastical bureaucrats. And though christianity is often a gross perversion of its roots, it has no monopoly on authoritarianism, war-mongering, and hatred of nature. The old testament god's apparent sadism and vindictiveness may be appalling, but were the other (non-judaic) state religions any better?

Baal demanded human sacrifice and complete obedience to government—without any influence by judaic thought. Many african tribes—unpolluted by christian civilization—developed hatred and fear of the wilderness: the Ibo (see Chinua Achebe) and the BeLese (See Colin Turnbull) for instance. The Iroquois and many other american Indian tribes were brutal murderers and torturers long before white men reached north america. The list goes on, but it's clear that it's not the essential nature of Christianity that produced the hate-filled and murderous civilization we suffer now: it was the authoritarian bastardization of that faith.

Any religion that allows itself to tolerate hierarchies, specialists, fixed dogmas, and experts, can easily manifest the same anti-life bias. It is the perversion of humanity's spiritual need that causes vicious deadly religion to develop and spread, not the need itself.

Thom Metzger
Rochester, NY

Our Place

Dear FE People:

Regarding your article on the Australian aborigines ("Aborigines Resist Genocide: Report from Australia," FE #316, Spring, 1984): In the area where I live, a mountain range bordering open grasslands which are now huge grain farms, the aboriginal population was shot out by 1909.

In the absence of any local history/ culture, we chose to call our place Cumaroogunga to keep alive some history from elsewhere. The word means "our place" and was used by an aboriginal group who broke away from a white mission station in Victoria to "squat" illegally back on their own land.

There is a move in Australia at present for institutionalized land rights for aborigines. It's difficult to know what the demands are without being personally involved, but the media presentation leads me to think that we may be seeing the development of racist "anti-racism" in much the same way as some elements of feminism have become quite sexist. Within our own circles we need to watch for such developments.

An example is in the screed for the Big Mountain alert in your country (see "Big Mountain: Native People Resist Forced Relocation and Assault on Old Ways," FE #317, Summer 1984). I quote: "As a guest of the traditional people, respect for their way of life is shown by your manner of dress, by following traditional customs, and by taking direction from the Elders and their representatives." That statement contains the same seeds that have flowered into oppression of minority groups all over the world. Let us respect each other by accepting our different appearances and customs, and by thinking for ourselves instead of taking direction from any authority.

I call for land rights for all people. I don't want a black landlord any more than I want a white landlord, or police person or politician. In solidarity with the Navajo and Hopi people.

Also, what do I do with the little white foam balls you packed round my books?

I don't think they'll compost very well.

Liz Scott

Cumaroogunga, Australia

George Bradford responds: While I understand your doubts about the request to respect the wishes of the Dine elders, if I were to visit Dine, Hopi, or other primal peoples' lands, I would be willing to respect the stipulation you cite. You are right that such demands could be a source of authoritarianism and domination, but they aren't necessarily so.

As always, we must be aware of the context; need I emphasize that these are not the people who established domination and the plague of civilization? In fact, they are among the last holdouts from authoritarian civilization, a people without government who have successfully maintained essentially anarchic social relations in the face of the greatest invasion and war of extermination in human history.

Because for millennia these people have had the wisdom and fortitude to resist power and accumulation, I think that we owe it to ourselves to pay close attention to their elders, who are the living messengers of a perspective from prehistory which exposes civilization for the monstrous aberration that it is.

And what demands do you think they are likely to make? I would guess that they have had enough of European do-gooders who unwittingly or consciously trample on their good-will, and publish such a stipulation to avoid desecration of their ceremonies and lands by visitors. I'm sure they respect differences—but remember that the "differences" expressed by civilized outsiders are often those modes of behavior characteristic of atomized, commodity society (the "freedom" to use drugs and alcohol and listen to tape recorded rock music, perhaps). Who can blame them if they won't stand for this on their lands?

If for some compelling reason I were to visit your grandparents' house, I would tend to respect their customs and their wishes in their home. In the case of Primal peoples, no separation exists between their house, their bodies, their sacred ceremonies, and their lands (their world). To desecrate or offend any element is to offend them all. If you insult their ceremonies or offend their sense of the sacred (especially with that Western, civilized havoc they are used to suffering from Europeans and Euroamericans), you are no different in their eyes than the mining companies which desecrate their lands.

In any case, one always has the freedom to consider the requests made by the elders "and their representatives," and, if objectionable to one's ethical or moral sense, refuse to comply and to leave. This isn't, say, Detroit, where noncompliance with the reigning cultural mode can mean violence or imprisonment!

I believe, with the Hau de no sau ne people (known as the Iroquois), authors of the 1977 document Basic Call to Consciousness, that "The traditional Native peoples hold the key to the reversal of the [destructive] processes of

Western Civilization...” I think those of us who are uprooted from our origins need to listen. Of course, one must always be careful to resist authoritarian, unjust acts, but we are in no position to appear on these peoples’ lands with our list of requirements and demands, something they have seen from the beginning. The elders have much to teach; I guess I’m willing to put myself out a bit to listen.

Thom Metzger seems to have missed the point of my article on christianity, which is similar to his own, that it is not humanity’s spiritual need that causes deadly religion, but the perversion of that need. In our investigations of the origins of the authoritarian plague, we have moved from an absolutely atheist position to one of appreciation for the spirituality of the Old Ways of primal peoples. It is this spirituality that I have offered as an alternative to the judeo-christian religion.

I do not deny that fear of nature can be found in other non-christian spiritual and cultural traditions. In fact, in certain traditions a perception of the wilderness as “other” is evident. Certain ritual acts among various peoples, as Mircea Eliade shows in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, symbolically repeat the act of Creation, “the transformation of chaos into cosmos,” in newly possessed territories. What lies beyond this known world is often seen as a desert inhabited by monsters. One could speculate that such a perception existed among peoples of the ancient Middle East where state religions and civilizations arose, and that the intense hatred for nature present in the judeo-christian tradition finds its roots in this sense of separation. It may also be the case that this sense is more evident among archaic peoples already living within the context of civilization, and not among groups who live closer to the natural world. In any case, there is an aspect in nature which is certainly to be feared and respected, as a northern person might fear straying too far in a blizzard. But what generally appears as only a tendency or potentiality in these cultures becomes the central mode in judeochristian civilization, for which living in tents is a curse and nature is the abode of the devil.

Judeo-christian civilization is based precisely on this denial of nature and the body. It is a hierarchical, authoritarian, punitive refusal of the flesh and the world demanded by a patriarchal, despotic abstraction, whose foremost command is that “man” subdue nature. (In fact the entire “genesis” proposed by this religion reveals that what man had to subdue first was woman—it appears to be a rewrite of the much older goddess mythology, and a cover-up of the usurpation of woman’s power by the patriarchs, as a careful reading of Joseph Campbell’s *Primitive Mythology* suggests.)

I won’t make the mistake of defending each and every negative characteristic of disparate tribal peoples from a laundry list compiled, I might add, by well-meaning anthropologists well after these groups had suffered contact with western civilization. That would obscure an important point: judeo-christianity cannot be treated as a single, isolated tribe with both its humane, positive aspects and its foibles, misconceptions and petty injustices. Like the Roman beast whence it flowered, it is a universal, imperial civilization. Kept to themselves, these groups might have resolved many of their social ills, but swept up in the process of collapse of tribal cultures and the “leviathanization” of Eurasia, they came to do irreparable harm wherever their wanderings led them.

I do recognize, nevertheless, that christianity now exists in many forms (as does Judaism), including among native peoples, and it won’t necessarily go away on account of what we say about it. I am humble enough about cultural diversity to take seriously Joseph Campbell’s observation (in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*) that the spiritual renewal necessary to transform the social order “will not be identical in the various parts of the globe; the circumstances of local life, race, and tradition must all be compounded in the effective forms.”

So it comes as no surprise that Misquito Indians fighting for their lands are Moravian christians, or that a Guatemalan Mayan activist, Rigaberta Menchu, states that “it was because of the Bible that we organized our struggle.” The phenomenon of cultural syncretism, the fusion of diverse forms throughout history, suggests that some form of christianity will survive where it has been imposed so long. In the case of many christianized indigenous peoples, it has not destroyed the spiritual foundations which link them to the Earth and help them to resist History. Where christian despiritualization of nature is a dominant factor, there I think it undermines the direct, unmediated communion these people have with the natural world, ushering in the plague of civilization. The role of evangelical fundamentalism, which not only destroys the sacred relationship the people have with the land, but which integrates them into fascist colonialist power structures, is a good example of this process. On the other hand, the very appeal and creativity of the liberation theology in Latin America may be found in the indigenous influences; the rest strikes me as liberal social welfarism, marxism and pro-development reformism.

I agree with the Hau de no sau nee document I quoted above when it states that “European churches...are the most dangerous agents of destruction [among natural world peoples]. They invariably seek to destroy the spiritual/economic bonds of the people to the forests, land and animals. They spread both ideologies and technologies which make people slaves to the extractive system which defines colonialism.” Metzger glibly writes off these Iroquois peoples as “brutal murderers and torturers” but to me that is merely a repetition of age-old lies spread by christian invaders in these lands to justify their own conquest and war of extermination—constituting more murder and torture than all the inhuman acts of pre- and non-christian history combined, Aztecs and Baal-worshippers included, I’d guess.

There had to have been some positive impulse among early christians and captive Jews, later perverted by politicians and bureaucrats. I see some of that original impulse in the courageous acts of resistance of christian communities today, and have said so. And for that process of perversion, may I (once more) recommend both Fredy Perlman’s *Against Leviathan* and Frederick Turner’s *Beyond Geography* as containing two of the most cogent speculative descriptions of that process that I have read. Obviously, everyone sorts it out for themselves—in anarchy there is room for many visions. But when I see how far that decrepit state religion has gone, despite the positive exceptions, I cannot muster the slightest enthusiasm for it, especially when an entire universe of possibility waits to be rediscovered in the spiritual wisdom of primal peoples.

(As for the *Basic Call to Consciousness*, which I have recently read for the first time, I have much more to say, but that will have to wait. Meanwhile, I’d like to recommend it to readers. This critique of “the modern world through Pleistocene eyes” is available from Akwesasne Notes, c/o Mohawk Nation, via Roosevelttown NY 13683 for \$5.50 plus \$1.00 postage and handling.)

Ana Coluthon responds: While not disagreeing with the foregoing, I think it would be a mistake to entirely discount the objections of Liz Scott, for as Fredy Perlman shows quite well in his article on nationalism in this issue, it is altogether possible for primitive people to adopt the methods of Leviathan and become another nationalist gang.

This is not to pass any judgment on the Big Mountain peoples, but the same warning bells that went off in Liz’ head upon seeing the language in question also rang in mine. Who knows what experiences gave rise to the directive, but if the situation is such that it is necessary, I sadly have to say I’ll stay at home and let my contribution to the struggle remain financial and journalistic. Are there readers who have had direct contact with the situation and will tell us what the deal is?

Dull The Viewer

Dear Fifth Estate:

I have been following with interest your continuing examination of the world of television. Most recently, Irene Brown of Farmington, Michigan defended television as a reformable medium [Letters, FE #317, Summer 1984].

I would advise her and all others who believe TV to be reformable, to read the brilliant *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television* by Jerry Mander. The FE has recommended this book in the past.

Mander points out in a convincing manner that TV is by its nature centralized (and thus diversity of opinion is impractical); the technical nature of the machine makes it a poor learning instrument, but a great one to dull the viewer in preparation for commercial suggestions; and perhaps most importantly, TV is without subtlety.

It is the unsubtle nature of TV which concerns me most. Chronic television viewers appear to me to be easily bored with the natural pace of life and constantly seek out pastimes which mirror the pace of television.

Having completely cut myself off from the screen in the last few months, coupled with long country walks, I find I am now much more able to read long and formerly “boring” books and listen to non-commercial music, long and also formerly “boring.”

I have to laugh when reformers describe their reformed television. It begins to sound like a book with pictures. Television should be abandoned because it can serve no purpose not presently accomplished through good social relations and good reading material.

Television is a problem because it promotes in leisure time the same mindset which is engendered by other machines in the work place. Television does not alleviate boredom, but creates it, by promoting an inhumanly fast pace of events; a pace which real life cannot (I hope) duplicate.

I am frightened by four-year-old TV viewers who through their connection with a TV mindspace are bored with a two kilometer walk, and find the atmosphere in a reader's home, "too quiet."

Fred Martin
Chatham, New Brunswick
Canada

Don't Preach

Dear Fifth Estate:

When we read, to quote Felice Rizzo, (And) "if you impose a nazi state upon other animals, as you do when you eat meat. you aren't a true radical," we were offended by its authoritarianism (Letters, FE #317, Summer 1984).

We wrote a short satirical letter that also asked some questions. E.B. Maple decides not to answer our questions and to offer another authoritarian argument (See FE Fall 1984).

We appreciate the information about animals' fatty cells retaining more chemical poisons than vegetables.

We don't appreciate the combination of "eat only that which I am personally willing to kill" with "images of the Nazi displacement of Jews and the extermination camps." This could be considered anti-semitic though we doubt it was meant to be.

We never asked "Is eating meat natural?" nor did we state that meat is not a commodity.

We did ask should people dictate others (including non-human) diets and we stated that vegetables are also commodities.

Sorry about too many sentences starting with pronouns but we wanted to be convicted for "crimes" we committed.

We however made no apologies to E.B. Maple or anyone else for being the disgusting "masses", who reject dictators. You may try to "educate" us but please don't preach.

The Wretched of the Earth
P.O. Box 57
West Nyack, N.Y. 10994

Hustler Again!

Dear Fifth Estate:

You're certainly welcome to the opinion that *Hustler's* use of consenting, well-paid models is "viciously sexist" (see Letters, FE #318, Fall, 1984), but you couldn't be farther off-base in your assertion that children are used in the magazine as "submissive objects." How you can make an irresponsible statement like that about something with which you are unfamiliar is beyond me.

If Larry Flynt can be thrown in the stammer for 15 months for throwing oranges at a judge (missed) and a D.A. (hit), he'd probably be drawn and quartered if an under-age model ever appeared in his skin rag. In fact, (I hope you'll take my word again) some of Hustler's most scathing editorials have been aimed at child pornographers and abusers. Shoot first and ask questions later seems to be your philosophy.

disappointed,
Al Medwin,
Farmingdale, N.J.

E.B. Maple responds: To me, the massive proliferation of pornography produced by a \$7 billion a year industry speaks more eloquently to the sexual misery prevalent in this society than any text possibly could.

Rather than relieve the desire for a full sexual life, pornography makes its denial that much more excruciating by manipulating our longings into paying for unbelievable fantasy. Worse, these fantastic images of exaggerated standards of beauty with their emphasis on youth, unrealistic sexual expectations and performance, and a generally distorted view of human relations only serve to push us that much farther from a genuine fulfillment. Instead, they serve to move us closer only to the commodities the magazines peddle as substitutes for real sexual joy.

The problem with pornography is that it never delivers what it promises and can give rise to a rage against women and a self-hatred that is easily sublimated into the consumption of commodities which represent sexuality. To be sure, this male rage emanates from many other sources in this culture, but let's not fool ourselves about the content of most pornography. It along with the family, constitutes the last remaining arena of male domination over women and children and much of its attraction is gained from this presentation.

I think it takes a considerable process of self-deception for someone who opposes all forms of domination to fail to see that the poses portrayed in all of the skin magazines are based on the humiliation of the models: a display of the genitals for the observing male. No woman with a sense of dignity holds open the lips of her vagina for inspection by male strangers other than when compelled to do so by wages.

Your statement about "well-paid consenting adults" is what any conservative supporter of the status quo says about all wage work. If confronted by an auto worker concerned about the health and safety standards at a Chrysler plant, the conservative's reply is: "You're not being forced to work there, and you're well paid! If you don't like it, you can leave." Please, Al, let's have a critique of this economy that goes beyond the capitalist bullshit of free choice within the market place.

Sexual workers—prostitutes, topless dancers, porn models, etc.—come almost exclusively from the working and poor classes, are often from minority communities, and their job "choice" is no more consenting nor free than any of the other choices of this society which are walled in by the culture of capital. The women in the ludicrous acrobatic poses in the pages of skin magazines, the nude dancer on a table top, or the beckoning street walker have only made the "choice" of a usually despised job in order to stay away from other offensive, humiliating and low-paying work, or welfare.

Sure, the mass circulation porn magazines tend toward a weak liberalism on most social issues, but take away the glistening vulvas from their centerfolds and their circulations will quickly be reduced to that of the *Fifth Estate*. I didn't mean to single out Hustler for special condemnation, but a magazine which publishes a regular cartoon feature entitled "Lester the Molester" whose gags center around child molestation, displays a cover of a woman in a meat grinder, or features an 8-page spread in which a woman is gang-raped on a pool table hardly deserves support from those who oppose the subjugation of others.

These magazines all prey upon our sexual weaknesses and as a male I suppress the interest I might have in these publications, not because I don't like to look at naked women, because I do. Rather, I avoid them because I hate to be a sucker and that's exactly what the Hefners and Flynt's make of us: chumps who buy their photographic representation of an impossible sexuality.

Souvenir Light

To the Fifth Estate & Co.:

I don't read your stupid books or your rag because I know you're guilt-tripping me. You make me out to be a racist bigot, a talking asshole.

Well, say what you want, you won't succeed in making me guilty about my forerunners (who you also benefit from, even while you deny it).

I say the Indians vanished because they lacked our modern medicine. They were ignorant of heart implants, nuclear medicine and tetracyclone. Their so-called medicine was quackery, mysticism, religion. As soon as our pioneering forerunners lit them up with the torch of Reason, they went up in smoke—proving that there was nothing there to begin with. The only Indians who survived into our times were the ones who were cured of their ignorance by our medicine.

I'm proud of our achievements. I'm proud that penicillin wiped out venereal disease, that modern sanitation wiped out Bubonic plague, that modern medicine is on the way to wiping out cancer. I look forward to the day when modern medicine cures you of your use of phony names and of your self-righteous nostalgia for the days of witch doctors.

I bet you're half cured already. I bet you use our freeways even while you curse them. I bet you transport your canoes to a lakeshore by automobile (I'd like to see you try portaging a canoe across a busy freeway). I bet you take your health problems to an MD and not a witch. And whatever you say about communicating with kin, I bet that when you visit your relatives, you watch TV with them, like everyone else.

Tall King

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1985

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Fifth Estate #319, Winter, 1985

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