

# Anarchy & the Sacred

## A Continuing Exchange

Dogbane Campion (David Watson)

Feral Faun

Lev Chernyi

1989

**FE NOTE:** This exchange continues an ongoing discussion in our pages that started with a report on the 1987 Minneapolis anarchist gathering (FE #326, Summer 1987). A letter exchange followed in FE #328, Spring 1988. Back issues can be ordered through our book service for 75 cents plus postage.

### Dear FE,

I read with some interest Dogbane Campion's reply to Jon Bekken's critical letter in FE No. 328/Spring 88. And while I'm no special fan of the ideological anarcho-syndicalism and/or anarcho-communism Bekken promotes, I still think his picket sign message, "Say NO to All religion!" is worth further consideration, just as FE's pro-spiritual stance is worth a more critical examination.

Dogbane himself comments in his criticism of the ideological anarchism frequently found in the anarchist classics, that it was saturated with a "positivist, religious faith in the mystique of material progress." And he later, approvingly, quotes Jacques Ellul's observation that in technological society "there is nothing spiritual anywhere. But man cannot live without the sacred. He therefore transfers his sense of the sacred to the very thing which has destroyed its former object: to technique itself."

My question is this, why is it not obvious that this "religious," "spiritual," "sacred," "faith" in technological rationality is a direct, though nominally inverted, continuation of the traditions of religious alienation in which it was incubated and from which it was born. For me, the continuities between religion and scientific ideologies are more significant than their differences. Why reject scientific ideology only to embrace the idiocies of religion, spiritualism and the sacred? Isn't it clear that your criticisms of the reification and worship of technique no less imply the importance of a critique of the reification and worship of nature?

I keep seeing a defense of the spiritual and the sacred in the pages of the FE that seems to have no justification save the close association these concepts have established with the anthropology of primitive societies. Must we uncritically adopt the cultural mistakes of the primitives in a package deal along with all that is more valuable and worthy of our emulation? Can't we realize that if our "more advanced" stage of human culture has become as fucked up as it has, that it is highly likely that its "more primitive" stages—even before the first hints of ecological catastrophe and institutionalized hierarchies—probably had their flaws too?

The concept of the sacred is the foundation for all religion, spiritualism, ideology, worship, faith, belief. It logically (and inevitably) implies the existence of the profane. And though it may be transmuted into many other dualities—good and evil, spirit and matter, god and devil—they all perform the same insidious function of dividing

our naturally whole experience of our world into two rather arbitrary conceptual spheres. The idea of the sacred is a conceptual fetishization, a reification of certain aspects of what we might otherwise more clearly see as the unity of our experience. Why not just jettison it in favor of a truly holistic and non-dualist perspective?

There's no compelling reason that I can see for uncritically accepting what I can only describe as the "ideology" of certain (I'm far from convinced that all shared it) primitive societies. As far as I can guess, the sacred seems to be the conceptual seed of civilization. Why continue to cultivate it?

Take care,  
Lev Chernyi

## **Hello, FE folk,**

Lone Wolf Circle's letter (entitled "Sacred World View" by FE editors) makes a common misuse of the word "sacred." "Sacred" does not mean and never has meant "intrinsic, equal." It means "separated, set apart" and usually specifically "set apart for a religious or other special purpose." A truly radical ecological viewpoint would, thus, utterly reject the concept of sacredness, pointing out that no being has a truly separate existence—we are all connected—so nothing is sacred.

It was the Judeo-Christian concept that humans were sacred—separated from and placed above all other beings—that was one of the main ideological justifications of the rape of the earth. There is evidence that the concept of the sacred played a major role in the development of property and exchange, authority, sex roles, work, agriculture and the domestication of animals. In other words, it is a major source of this alienated civilization.

Of course, Lone Wolf Circles says basically that everything is sacred. But that is both blatantly untrue (everything is not "set aside for a special purpose") and, like all such glittering generalities, meaningless. It tells us nothing. It is just as meaningful, and more true, to say nothing is sacred. It cannot be, an abstraction like "sacredness" which motivates our defense of the earth, but our own very real, personal love for the natural wild beings we interact with. Otherwise, we will fall into the absurd moralism and dogmatism which can be found in the writings of Abbey, Foreman, Miss Ann Thropy, and their ilk.

For a world of wild, free beings sharing pleasure without constraint  
Feral Faun

## **Dogbane Campion replies:**

Lev Chernyi argues that the notion of the sacred that has been transferred to technology is "a direct, though nominally inverted, continuation of...religious alienation..." To the degree that this is true, it is because science and industrialism grew out of a culture whose religious experience was already cut off from deeper spiritual realities. While he and I agree that scientific materialism is itself a dogmatic faith (at least for most people, including the practitioners of science), on what other basis but empiricism and science does the modern atheist reject the "idiocies" of the sacred in all its manifestations?

To say, further, that the intuition of the sacred is false because the world is simply what it is, is to overlook that the world is also not what it is. The Christian civilization that created industrialism had lost sight of this insight, but it was understood in most archaic, and particularly primal, societies. "From one point of view all those divinities exist," a Tibetan lama told a visitor, "from another they are not real." And a Tantric text puts it, "All of these visualized deities are but symbols representing the various things that occur on the Path." (quoted in Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, p. 181) In an essay on the role of clowns in native American cultures, Barbara Tedlock tells the story of a white man cured by a Navajo healer during a Red Ant ceremony, who asked "whether he really had red ants in his system. The curer told him, 'No, not ants, but ants. We have to have a way of thinking strongly about disease.'" (in Dennis and Barbara Tedlock, *Teachings from the American Earth*, p. 109)

Are the ants real, and the ants an illusion? Is something someone tells you in a dream less real than what is told you in waking life, even if what you hear in the dream has such an effect upon you so as to change your life? Lev is

confusing ants and ants, but primal peoples don't seem to do so. "The Sanema Indians told the anthropologist Johannes Wilbert that their shamans could fly, or at least walk one foot above the ground," reports Hans Peter Duerr in his luminous book *Dream-time: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilization*. "Naively, the scientist answered that after all, he could see that the shamans ran around like anybody else. Whereupon the Indians countered, 'The reason for that is that you do not understand.'...Put differently, one might say that the Indians knew that the ethnographer had not the faintest notion what the word 'flying' meant in shamanistic context, because he supposed that one could only fly like a bird or like a Pan Am Pilot." (ps. 83-4)

If anything characterizes technological civilization's "magical rationalism," to use a term that reflects what I was trying to say previously, it is an intense fear of such flying combined with a pathological, earth-destroying desire to simulate such flying with a physical apparatus. This society has forgotten what the shaman knows, and what the popular song reminds us, that thinking is the best way to travel. Shamanistic flight becomes less and less possible in a world in which living nature is reduced to dead objects—resources or commodities—and from which spirit is banished: a world in which nothing is sacred. The need to fly remains, of course, hence Pan Am and the space shuttle. Technology rules in such a world because no other meaning remains other than blind instrumentalism and procedural nothingness.

In primal society, on the other hand, technique was kept to its proper dimensions by making it more a question of experimentation in order to see, confirming Mircea Eliade's definition of shamanism in his book by that name as a "technique of ecstasy." Such experimentation is found, to give some extreme examples, among the Inuit, who advise the explorer, "Go to a lonely place and rub a stone in a circle on a rock for hours and days on end," or "Let the person who wants a vision hang himself by his neck. When his face turns purple, take him down and have him describe what he's seen." (See *Shaking the Pumpkin: Traditional Poetry of the North American Indians*, edited by Jerome Rothenberg, p. 197.)

## A Question of Metaphor

Chernyi sees no justification for the affirmation of the sacred "save for the close association" between this perspective and primal societies—an enormous exception! These societies were saturated in myth, saturated in the sacred; we cannot approve their sense of kinship and community, their reciprocity and communism, their stateless anarchy, their sensitive integration with the natural world, and then dismiss their profound sense of the sacredness of nature and the cycles of life, as "cultural mistakes." As Eliade has observed, in such societies, "every act which has a definite meaning—hunting, fishing, agriculture, games, conflicts, sexuality—in some way participates in the sacred...the only profane activities are those which have no mythical meaning, that is, which lack exemplary models." (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*, ps. 27-8) All meaningful acts, therefore, connect humans with the nonhuman other, the sacred. And as Ernst Cassirer has written, basic mythic conceptions and acts "are not mere products of fantasy which vapor off from fixed, empirical, realistic existence, to float above the actual world like a bright mist; to primitive consciousness they present the totality of Being. The mythical form of conception is not something super-added to certain definite elements of empirical existence; instead, the primary 'experience' itself is steeped in the imagery of myth and saturated with its atmosphere." (*Language and Myth*, p. 10)

Does the intuition of the sacred signal a reification of nature as it "really" is, or is it a question of the metaphorical, analogical forms of thought that characterize this intuition? Is the idea of the sacred a mystique that conceals an essential "unity of...experience" or is it a way through this remarkable and problematic phenomenon called mind, of connecting with and apprehending the world? Is sacred myth a lie, or as Joseph Campbell puts it, "the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation"? (*Hero*, p. 3) Is it certain that the notion of the sacred is the direct source of alienated religion and abstract science, or could alienated religion itself be a simulation of the original notion, with this ambivalence between ants and ants suppressed, in order to legitimate a nascent leviathan and its breach of the reciprocal gift and symbolic cycles? And with the passing of so many generations of slaves, couldn't this religion have become a pillar of authoritarian conditioning, a spectral image of that which it replaced?

Why do we suffer when someone cuts down an ancient tree? Is it because "resources" are being wasted, or because we think the tree-cutter is making an obscene profit, or is it for aesthetic reasons? Or is there some level of

meaning, connection, kinship, that has a spiritual, sacred character, a personhood? How about if someone cuts down our parents? Does a spirit reside within them, the people and the trees, is there an orenda there, or are they just loops of geobiochemical processes? The impoverished optic of scientific rationalism dismisses this orenda, this manitu, this Mighty Something as superstitious idiocy. Similarly, the ethnographer congratulates himself for knowing that the vision of the bruja is “really” only a hallucination caused by pharmacological substances. Commenting on this mentality, Duerr writes, “What is real, the scientists say, must pass our tests.” Of course to pass our tests this reality must be commensurable to our experiments, must fit into our laboratory. But by that time it no longer matters. Duerr quotes a Haitian proverb which says that “the spirits leave the island when the anthropologists arrive.” (p. 127)

## **A Range of Reality**

Yet for the primal or archaic person, as Eliade points out, “It is the experience of the sacred—that is, an encounter with a transhuman reality—which gives birth to the idea that something really exists.” (*Myth and Reality*, p. 139) And as Robin and Tomia Ridington write in an essay on shamanism in the Tedddlock book, myths “do not give meaning to life but rather disclose the meaning that is its intrinsic property.” (p. 191) “The shaman does not really fly up and down, but inside to the meaning of things.” (p. 192) One might ask, if the sacred has a symbolic dimension, why not go past it to a direct experience of reality? As Duerr might answer, “What the sorcerer is concerned with is to demonstrate to the anthropologist that there is a range of reality which his armour-plated culture usually forbids him to enter, and even more importantly, to recognize as reality.” (p. 92) While the rationalist may try to stand back from events to see an “objective” view, the shaman participates in them,

In *An Essay on Man*, Ernst Cassirer points out that this dual reality with which the primal person lives and which civilization tries to suppress actually does represent a more fundamental unity. The primal person, he writes, does not approach reality “with merely pragmatic or technical interest...His view of nature is neither merely theoretical nor merely practical; it is sympathetic...Primitive man by no means lacks the ability to grasp the empirical differences of things. But in his conception of nature and life all these differences are obliterated by a stronger feeling: the deep conviction of a fundamental and indelible solidarity of life that bridges over the multiplicity and variety of its single forms. He does not ascribe to himself a unique and privileged place in the scale of nature. The consanguinity of all forms of life seems to be a general presupposition of mythical thought.” (p. 109) Commenting on this celebrated passage, Jamake Highwater remarks that for native americans, this solidarity of life “is an expression of kinship and not a conviction of unity.” (*The Primal Mind*, p. 69) In such a way, it does not impose any single vision, but rather “a multiverse of possibilities.” (p. 68)

The rediscovery of a primal vision has barely started, along with the critical luddism that contests science and technology. What can it mean for us to ferret out the “flaws” of primal society and its vision, flaws that may have existed, we are told, “even before the first hints” of hierarchy and ecological destruction? Such a search, probably says more about our society than it does about theirs. Or perhaps nature, too, has its flaws, flaws which existed even before a hint of the appearance of this problematic, tricksterish figure, humanity.

And can we even use the word “stage” (even qualified by putting quotation marks around the obviously mechanistic and eurocentric “primitive” and “advanced” stages), given the long continuity and stability of such societies—some ninety-nine percent of human existence—in contrast with our eyeblink of history? Can we assume that the sacred as it existed for someone like Black Elk or a Tungus shaman led “directly” to what it came to mean to born-again christians, imams, and NASA technocrats? Couldn’t it be that there was instead a reversal of magnetic poles in primitive society, that led to the rupture and to state society, with causes that may be beyond available evidence and our ability to uncover? Isn’t the notion of a fatal flaw or first cause more something we bring to this question from our world?

## **Our World Has Been Desacralized**

Our world has been desacralized, even though we are plagued by “magical rationalism” or what has been called technolatriy, so it is difficult for us to comprehend a sacred vision free of alienated and manipulative aspects. It is

because our civilization has suppressed the balance between ants and ants. The world of ants has been degraded to energy and resources; the world of ants has been burned at the stake.

In Europe, both events coincided in the first stirrings of industrial capitalism. I wouldn't argue that we can directly recreate such an integrated vision; I am only arguing that we cannot and must not deny it. The sacred persists, either as a revenge on its own repression, as the quote from Ellul suggests, or as an opening for us to experience that mysterious other in nature and in ourselves. The Teton Sioux bear singer sings, my paw is sacred all things are sacred.

(See Jerome Rothenberg, editor, *Technicians of the Sacred*, P. 417.) It is not a logical absurdity, as Feral argues, that everything is sacred. It depends, for one thing, on how we define everything.

The dualities that Lev derides may also be a matter of interpretation. As Stanley Diamond writes in his essay "Job and the Trickster," the structure of civilization is reflected in deep, deterministic, unyielding dualities of good and evil. Ambivalence, which among primal peoples is allowed freedom to express itself fully and openly (for example, through the tradition of clowns who mock sacred ceremonies with impunity and who thus play an important role in reminding people of the mythic duality), is suppressed in civilization.

"Conversely," Diamond writes, "among primitive peoples, all antinomies are bound into the ritual cycle. The sacred is an immediate aspect of man's experience. Good and evil, creation and destruction—the dual image of the deity as expressed in the trickster—are fused in the network of actions that define primitive society. Therefore moral fanaticism, based as it is on abstract notions of pure good, pure evil and the exclusive moral possibility or fate of any particular individual—what may be called moral exceptionalism—is absent among primitive people. In primitive perspective, human beings are assumed to be capable of any excess. But every step of the way, the person is held to account for those actions that seriously threaten the balance of society and nature." (*In Search of the Primitive*, ps. 290–91)

The clown underscores this refusal of absolute dualities. In native american societies, the clown lived a life of reversals, throwing every custom and even notions of common sense into question; once recognized as such a person, the clown was considered as special and protected. Clowns would wear heavy clothing in the hot summer and go nearly naked in the winter, complaining about the cold in the summer and the heat in the winter. Every experience was derealized, to use the surrealist term, by the clown, in what has been called a "burlesque of the sacred." Diamond notes, referring to this cultural mode, that one "can hardly imagine" such mockery "taking place, at, let us say, a modern patriotic ceremony; in this sense all state structures tend toward the totalitarian. But, among primitives, sacred events are frequently and publicly caricatured, even as they occur." (ps. 153–54)

According to Barbara Tedlock, "the Navajo clown who reveals sleight-of-hand tricks [thus causing the people to laugh at the shamans] is in effect reminding the people that these tricks are not in themselves the power which cures them, but are instead a symbolic demonstration of power which is itself invisible." (p. 109) Another writer on the Navajos observes that although Navajo belief "stresses the dichotomy of good and evil, it does not set one off against the other. It rather emphasizes one quality or element in a being which in different circumstances may be the opposite. Sun, though 'great' and a 'god,' is not unexceptionally good...Similarly, few things are wholly bad...Thus evil may be transformed into good; things predominantly evil, such as snake, lightning, thunder, coyote, may even be invoked. If they have been the cause of misfortune or illness, they alone can correct it...In short, definition depends upon emphasis, not upon exclusion." (Reichard's *Navajo Religion*, quoted in *Technicians of the Sacred*, ps. 499–500)

Tedlock tells the Acoma tale of the first clown, who, interestingly, "was different from the other people because he knew something about himself...and since he was not 'afraid of anything,' nor did he 'regard anything as sacred,' he was 'to be allowed everywhere.'" (p. 110) Even an irreverent, nonbelieving prankster found a place in such a community. The contrast with the repressive religions of this world is stark, though the clown tradition existed even into the late Middle Ages in christian Europe, which should prevent us from painting even that period in unambiguous black and white. Remember that such paint was mixed by eighteenth century philosophes and nineteenth century positivists. The rigid dualities that Lev Chernyi protests do not appear to come from that constellation of sacred beliefs we see among primal peoples; rather, they seem to be part of the process by which the Old Ways are suppressed.

This is not to argue that we should mechanistically copy the ways of primal peoples; we are who we are and can do nothing but start from our own historical experience. But I think that the growing recognition of the sacredness of the living Earth, of the personhood of the sky, land and waters, of our familial and emotional connection to the rest of creation, is a fundamental element in finding our place in the natural world and re-establishing a proper balance with it. It is a necessary component, I think, in what Lewis Mumford called that “profound and ultimately planet-wide re-orientation of modern culture” that it will take to turn the present exterminist onslaught around. (*The Pentagon of Power*, p. 371) Obviously, we have to be very careful how we express this intuition, we need to act with a certain humility. We can’t pretend to have some spiritual program or a new religion; it would be ludicrous and manipulative and end up a horrible simulation of the forms of primal animism without any of their content. But a dramatic renewal of identification with the Earth and revulsion against an instrumental relationship with it seem necessary to break through this civilization and create a new culture.

The situationist image of people making a revolution to realize their own desires is incomplete; they must also establish a community with the land. As Theodore Roszak writes in *Where the Wasteland Ends*, “Until we find our way once more to the experience of transcendence, until we feel the life within us and the nature about us as sacred, there will seem to be no ‘realistic’ future other than more of the same: a single vision and the artificial environment forever and ever, amen.” (p. 420)

“It may be that some little root of the sacred tree still lives. Nourish it, then, that it may leaf and bloom and fill with singing birds.” —Black Elk

Note: I prefer to leave the texts I quote as they were in the original, but I do not support their sexist, exclusionist character. They show how far we still have to go.

# fifth Estate

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