

“Anarchist religion?”

Peter Lamborn Wilson

It's often said that we anarchists “believe humans are basically good” (as did the Chinese sage Mencius). Some of us, however, doubt the notion of inherent goodness and reject the power of other people over us precisely because we don't trust the bastards. It seems unwise to generalize about anarchist “beliefs” since some of us are atheists or agnostics, while others might even be Catholics. Of course, a few anarchists love to indulge in the spurious disagreeable and pointless exercise of ex-communicating the differently-faithed amongst their comrades.

This tendency of anti-authoritarian groupuscules to denounce and exclude each other, however, has always struck me as rather crypto-authoritarian. I've always liked the idea of a “plumb-line” anarchism broad enough to cover almost all variants of dogma in a kind of acephalous but loosely “united front” (or “union of egoists” as Stirner put it). This umbrella ought to be wide enough to cover “spiritual anarchists” as well as the most inflexible materialists.

Nietzsche famously founded his project on “nothing”—but ended up having hinted at a kind of moralityless, even godless religion (“Zarathustra,” “overcoming,” “eternal return,” etc.). In his last “Mad Letters” from Turin, he seems to elect himself (anti-) messiah of this faith under the signature “Dionysus the Crucified One.”

It turns out that even the axiom “nothing” requires an element of faith, and may lead toward some kind of spiritual or even mystical experience: the self-defined heretic is simply proposing a different belief. “The Death of God” is mysteriously followed by the rebirth of “the gods”—the pagan deities of polytheism.

Thus, Nietzsche proposes the re-paganization of monotheism when he speaks as Christ-Dionysus—a project first launched in the Renaissance by such heretics and neo-pagans as Gemistho Plethon and Giordano Bruno—the latter burned at the stake by the Vatican in 1600.

This very task—the re-paganization of monotheism—was carried out brilliantly by the African slaves who created Santeria, Voudoun, Candomblé, and many other religions in which Christian Saints are identified or syncretized with pagan deities. Chango “is” St. Barbara, for example; Oggun the war-god is Archangel Michael, and might be considered the Roman war god Mars, as well. (See M.A. DeLaTorre, Santeria).

The saints are “masks” for the spirits of the oppressed—but they are not mere disguises. Many santeristas are both Catholic and Pagan at the same time—which naturally drives The Church crazy!

As my anthropologist friend Jim Wafer said in *The Taste of Blood*, these New World faiths are not exactly “opium of the people” (even in the oddly positive and slightly wistful way Marx used that phrase), but rather areas of resistance against malign power. In such religions Dionysus can indeed “be” Jesus—or Obbatala Ayagguná—in a deliberate delirium of pantheism where nothing depends on mere belief because actual trance possession by “santos” (Orishas, Loas) allows everyone present to see, touch and even “be” the gods themselves.

(Wafer was once hit up for drinks in a bar in Recife by a stranger who turned out to “be” a minor rum-loving deity.) Moreover—another Nietzschean point—these cults value magic over morality—and believe in gods even for queers, thieves, witches, gamblers, etc.

Oscar Wilde was first to notice the profound likeness of anarchism and Taoism which structurally is an acephalous congeries of polytheist (pagan) sects, with a tendency toward heterodoxy and non-authoritarian social values.

Obviously some forms of Taoism—or any pagan system—have been quite complicit with the State; we might call them Orthodoxies, and in this sense forerunners of monotheism. But the pagan spirit always includes an anarchic element too—a Paleolithic resistance to the State/Church and its hierarchies. Paganism simply creates new cults, or takes old ones underground, cults that are and must be heretical to the ruling Consensus. (Thus, old European paganism “survived” as medieval witchcraft, and so on.)

In classical Rome, the oriental Hellenistic mystery cults, magical syncretisms of Greek, Egyptian, Babylonian and even Indian pantheons and rituals, threatened the traditional and Imperial order. One of these cults, a Jewish heresy, actually succeeded in “overthrowing” Classical paganism.

I suspect that a similar dialectic can be seen at work in 21st century USA with its “Imperium” complex, its 60 per cent churchgoing citizenry, its electronic “bread and circuses,” its money-based consciousness, etc.

A mass of oriental and New Age “mystery cults” continue to proliferate and morph into new forms, providing (as a whole) a kind of popular heterodoxy or pagan-like congeries of sects, some of them inherently dangerous to central authority and capitalist technopathocracy. Indeed, various sorts of spiritual anarchism could be mentioned here as part of the spectrum.

I’m proposing that fascist and fundamentalist cults are not to be confused with the non-authoritarian spiritual tendencies represented by authentic neo-shamanism, psychedelic or “entheogenic” spirituality, the American “religion of Nature” according to anarchists like Thoreau, sharing many concerns and mythemes with *Green Anarchy* and Primitivism, tribalism, ecological resistance, Native American attitudes toward Nature...even with Rainbow and Burning Man festivalism.

Here in the Catskills, we’ve had everything from Krishnamurti to the Dalai Lama, Hasidism to Communism, Buddhism, postindustrial agriculture and Slow Food, hippy communes of the ‘Sixties—Tim Leary-swami upon pandit, Wiccan upon druid—sufis and yogis—a landscape ripe for syncretism and spiritual universalism, ready to become a “burnt-over district” of mystic enthousiasmos for green revolution, if only some spark would set off a torch—or so one might dream.

In the context of the belief I’m envisioning I would situate Walter Benjamin’s notion of the Profane Illumination. How, he asks, can spiritual experience be guaranteed outside the context of “religion” or even of “belief?”

Part marxist, part anarchist, part Kabbalist, he carried on the old German Romantic quest for a re-paganization of monotheism “by any means necessary,” including heresy, magic, poetry, hashish...Religion has stolen and suppressed the “efficacious sacrament” from the elder shamans, wizards and wise women and the Revolution must restore it.

Recently, the idea of an historical Romantic and even Occultist Left has gained wide acceptance and no longer needs to be defended. Bruno’s statue in the “Flowery Field” where he died remains an icon for the freethinkers and rebels of Rome, who keep it decked in red flowers. The alchemist Paracelsus sided with the Peasants in their uprising against the Lutheran nobility.

An Emersonian reading of German Romanticism (especially Novalis) might interpret its “first thoughts; best thoughts” as seed and fruit of Revolution. William Blake is a radical heretical institution unto himself. Left-wing French Romanticism (and Occultism) give birth to a Charles Fourier, a Nerval, a Rimbaud. This deep tradition of “Romantic Revolution” should be added to the consideration of any possible anarchist spirituality.

The mystics claim that “belief” is delusion; only experience grants certainty, whereupon mere faith is no longer required. They may even come to defend mystical or spiritual (self)liberation against the oppression of organized religion. Blake urges everybody to get a system of their own and not to be a slave to someone else’s—especially not “The Church’s.” And, G. de Nerval, who had a pet lobster named Thibault which he took for walks in the Palais Royal gardens in Paris on the end of a blue silk ribbon, on being accused of lacking any religion, said, “What? Me, no religion? Why, I have at least seventeen of them!”

In conclusion: any liberatory belief system, even the most libertarian (or libertine), can be flipped 180 degrees into a rigid dogma—even anarchism (as witness the case of the late Murray Bookchin). Conversely, even within the most religious of religions the natural human desire for freedom can carve out secret spaces of resistance (as witness the Brethren of the Free Spirit, or certain dervish sects).

Definitions seem less important in this process than the cultivation of what Keats called “negative capability,” which here might be glossed as the ability to ride the wave of liberation no matter what outward form it might happen to take.

Back in the 1950s, it might have been “Beat Zen” (which sadly seems to have disappeared); today it might be neo-paganism or Green Hermeticism. Just as anarchism today needs to overcome and shed its historical worship of “Progress,” so, too, I think it might benefit by loosening up on its 19th century atheism and re-considering the possibility (oxymoronic as it might be) of an “anarchist religion.”

[Note: In memoriam Franklin Rosemont I should add that the kind of Hermetico-anarchism proposed here characterizes the late Breton, and later Surrealism in general. I’d also like to invoke the Arab poet Adonis’s great book on Sufism & Surrealism. And, recommend the Harvard edition of W. Benjamin’s *On Hashish*. Sometimes it gets down to that old deliberate derangement of the senses...Sometimes the opium of the people is...opium.]

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