

Godless: 150 Years of Disbelief

Peter Werbe

2020

a review of

Godless: 150 Years of Disbelief edited by Chaz Bufe; Introduction by Don Arel. PM Press, 2019 pmpress.org

More than a thousand years ago, a Chinese Zen master wrote: Magical power, Marvelous action! Chopping wood, Carrying water. The eleven essays assembled here by See Sharp Press publisher Chaz Bufe are effective diatribes against belief in gods that completely destroy every aspect and argument on which Christianity and other religions are based.

Although some of the texts are of recent vintage, all are rooted in the traditional notion on the left and among anarchists that religion is the “opiate of the masses,” as has been famously said, and, hence, the distinct enemy of revolution.

In the opening essay, “The God Pestilence,” late 19th century American anarchist Johann Most nails religion as “a reign of terror,” a bloody sword that has brought death and destruction, torture and pillage to the faithful for thousands of years. Plus, the fog of religion, he insists, makes the believer incapable of independent thought. He acidly writes of the believer, “...once in the clutches of the priests, his intellect becomes barren—his intellectual functions cease to operate in a normal way, and instead religious maggots and divine worms wriggle through his brain.” Whew!

What doesn’t get addressed in any of the essays is why there is something in the religious spirit among the most devout that gives rise to such murderous impulses as we’ve seen in history and in contemporary slaughters among those with a slightly different take on a belief.

The faithful often answer this question with the “humans are flawed” argument, so that the blatant hypocrisy and violence associated with the most devout, it is claimed, doesn’t invalidate the fundamental beliefs or institutions operating in the name of various gods. But this needs closer attention.

Almost all cultures across the globe, beginning at least in the Neolithic era 12,000 years ago, devised spiritual explanations for the fundamental questions of human existence. This occurrence was so universal that geneticist Dean Hamer recently suggested the physical presence of a so-called god gene within our human genetic composition.

Joseph Campbell, a 20th century academic who studied comparative mythology, similarly noted what he called a monomyth, one basic myth about existence expressed in a multitude of spiritualities world-wide that are but variations on a single great story.

And, perhaps one or both of these explanations for universal spiritual expression is correct. However, this in no way validates any or all religious beliefs. A better explanation can be found in the basic theory of evolution. Maybe within the social structures of early human bands there was a need for a mythical explanation of life’s purpose and processes, an overarching narrative as adaptation for group cohesion and hence, survival.

The mytho-poetic spirituality that marked most pre-state social formations was a necessary component of their existence and can be illustrated by a circle within which all in a society held hands—the people, the flora, fauna, and the earth itself. All with an interconnected importance and purpose.

With the end of the Neolithic period 3,500 years ago and the rise of the state, this spiritual impulse is directed away from a circularity and replaced by a social pyramid where male sky gods replicate the newly formed hierarchical and patriarchal political structures and whose function is to sanctify the ruling order.

The intense hostility of revolutionaries to religion in the last 150 years chronicled in *Godless* is understandable since religion remained a central bulwark of the state in the modern era just as it was at its origin.

Christianity, for instance, never had a Golden Age before turning into a state-approved racket sanctifying the authority of the Roman emperor and subsequent ruling orders. Religion's role has lessened in recent years, but the most faithful still are the base of authoritarian political movement and states.

Spirituality, taking thousands of forms world-wide, are human-devised stories that obviously can't all be simultaneously true regardless of Joseph Campbell's theories of a single narrative expressed differently. In other words, spiritual beliefs are stories creatively rendered to meet the needs of a particular culture at a given time.

Some are worse than others. The Judeo-Christian story of a fall from grace and redemption through sacrifice is not particularly unique as several other Middle Eastern myths express this pattern, but the idea that we are born with sin as an inherent definition is a particularly pernicious and odious idea.

However, if we do have a god gene in us, and since churches by the thousands are thankfully closing across North America and Europe, maybe we need to make up one with better symbolism than a man being tortured because of our inherent corruption. Men (gender specific intended) invented the narrative fiction of the sky god religions to justify class rule and the suppression of women.

We can do better than that!

Let's devise a spiritual belief that honors the sacrifice of the exploding star that scattered its atoms across the universe until they congealed in this solar system and created the planets and provided the building material for all its creatures including us. We can come together regularly to sing songs and have ceremonies in abandoned sky god houses of worship (no more worshipping!) about how everything is part of everything else and all deserve honor and protection. We can have lots of days off to recognize the sun (forget about the Son) and the moon and all the planets, and ourselves and all the creatures and the rocks, rivers, and plants. No priests.

Or, if that's all too complicated or inconvenient, how about just everyone adhering to the Golden Rule?

I suspect most readers of this publication don't need convincing of the absurdity of religious belief systems, that they are a bulwark of political power, and lead to disunity rather than how they functioned 10,000 years ago within small band societies.

But, try this book out on your religious friends and family members. Maybe ask them to skip Most's vituperative essay where he calls religious people "brain defilers." However, it would be difficult for any of them to refute Sebastien Faure's essay, "Twelve Proofs of the Nonexistence of God," (proving non-existence is tough!) or editor Chaz Bufe's "Twenty Reasons to Abandon Christianity." Early feminist Matilda Gage's 1893 "Woman, Church and State" makes clear the relationship of the latter to the suppression of the former.

Humor makes an appearance in Earl Lee's send up of *Dogspell*, a book urging Christians to have the same devotion to God as their pets do to them. Lee asks, does that mean being "on all fours, sniffing the crotch of God."

And, the epigram at the beginning? Chop wood, carry water, and the meaning of life becomes clear. It's what we do and what we choose every minute of the day that defines who we are and life's purpose.

No gods; no masters.

Peter Werbe is a member of the *Fifth Estate* editorial collective.

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2020

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Fifth Estate #405, Winter, 2020

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