Anarchism and the fight against organized religion are inseparable wherever capitalism, private property, social hierarchies or slavery are justified by theology.

The problem of religion parallels that of authority. Any god will stand as an authority figure, governing the universe, and yet religious anarchists have carved out a fair, sweet world for themselves by guarding their flank with a pagan or a vague, spiritual god. No simple explanation stands, and answers often come when the anarchist lies on his or her death-bed, casting gods and masters out for the final record.

Being attractive to people who question any prevailing hierarchy, anarchism can co-exist with atheistic or dissenting religious views, and in both cases have been in a continuous conflict with organized religion. In 1609 British investors drafted Laws Divine, Moral, and Martial, providing for the torture and execution of their personnel in Virginia and Bermuda who were caught escaping from plantations to join the anarchistic native societies of those lands. In Boston during the 1630s the Antinomian intellectual Ann Hutchinson was absolutely devoted to Christianity, but in Monday night meetings at her home she discussed the previous day's sermon with neighbors, and took the anarchistic position that any person who was with God was equal in all ways to any other person (male or female) who was with God. With her female identity and intellectual eminence adding to the displeasure of Puritan authorities, Hutchinson endured a humiliating trial, house arrest, and then banishment from the colony.

Views similar to hers were developed in the fight against slavery during the 1830s, by then usually called Immediatism, or the immediate and direct government of God over each human being, with no intermediary such as a professional clergy or state institutions. This meant that a master usurped the authority of God by making moral choices for a slave, and it defied government authority. William Lloyd Garrison professed "non-resistance" as a guiding principle for abolitionists: the New Testament forbids the use of force (instead to "turn the other cheek"), government is upheld by force, and thus a Christian must abstain from government. The fact that the New England Non-Resistance Society (of which Garrison was the leader) allowed "infidels" among its members was as controversial among abolitionists as was its inclusion of women and Negroes.

Most important 19th century anarchist theorists agreed that people acquire the habit of obedience to the State from the persuasion of theistic religion. Mikhail Bakunin wrote that "there is not, there cannot be, a State without religion," and also that "if God existed, it would be necessary to abolish him." PierreJoseph Proudhon wrote that "if God exists, he is Man's enemy." Both viewed the belief of privileged classes that they are nearer to, or more favored by God as the chief pretext for their exercise of earthly authority.

None of them, however, opposed freedom of religion. It was the monopoly of theology that presented a societal problem. Max Stirner, whose 1845 book The Ego and His Own has remained a foundation-stone of anarchist individualism, wrote, "I no longer do anything for [the world] 'for God's sake,'! do nothing 'for Man's sake,' but what I do, I do 'for my sake.'" Stirner felt that he was entitled to overthrow all deities "if I can. If I cannot, then these gods will always remain in the right and in the might against me." He held that religious thought was just one of the avenues by which laws are created, along with the concept of 'rights' brought up in popular
revolution. His egoism rejected anything that made laws, because all laws created a 'sacred' boundary, interfering with the interests of the individual.

The French anarchist outlaw known by his maternal surname Ravachol had a violent career of reprisals against state violence that included the strangling of an elderly hermit-monk who hoarded money. In 1892 he walked to the guillotine singing the song "Pere Duchesne," but the blade fell as he sang its penultimate verse:

If you want to be happy, god damn it,

hang your landlord, cut the priests in two, god damn it!

Knock the churches to the ground, bloody god!

bury the good god in shit, god damn it!

The song is still popular today among French anarchists.

Jewish anarchists of the late 1880s were prominent in a public anti-religious campaign, with atheist-Talmudists lecturing against the religion and the holding of "Yom Kippur Balls" on that most solemn holiday, when all non-religious activities halt. This developed from a more discreet tradition by which radical groups held secular social gatherings so there would be something to do on the high holidays other than stay home or pray. Taking it a step a step further in London and several U.S. cities, they announced public dancing and drinking parties for which they printed special atheist brochures by gifted anarchists including the songwriter David Edelstadt. The balls drew violent opposition from religious Jews and suppression by authorities through the mid-90s, yet Jewish anarchists were involved in atheist events on high holidays as late as 1905. Speaking at some of the Yom Kippur balls was the (non-Jewish) German anarchist leader Johann Most, whose popular 1883 pamphlet "The God Pestilence" uses his typically harsh language. "If a person is once in the clutches of the priests," he wrote, "his intellect becomes barren... and instead, religious maggots and divine worms wriggle through his brain. He resembles a sheep that has the stagsgers."

Anarchist novelists and playwrights have produced masterful works of unbelief. Examples include the autobiographical novel Sebastien Roche (1890) by Octave Mirbeau, which describes a boy student at a Jesuit school who is raped and psychologically devastated by a priest. The novel La Petite Ecuyere a Caftt (1996) by Jean-Bernard Pouy, of which the villains are murderous Catholic anti-abortion crusaders who are undone by an independent anarchist investigator, began the "Le Poulpe" series of dissident pulp fiction, by hundreds of (often anarchist) authors. Other examples use an anarchist but non-atheist plot, such as Ursula K. Le Guin's science fiction novel The Word for World is Forest (1976). The people of a certain planet repel an invasion by capitalist plunderers who have enslaved them. One of the forest-dwellers temporarily becomes a god, only for the period when the rebellion and a leader are necessary. After the war, he returns to his life with no title or special status.
Octave Mirbeau's debut in theater was Les Mauvais Bergers (The Bad Shepherds, 1898). The lead character was an anarchist militant who leads a long and difficult strike. The workers turn against him and are about to lynch him on a "Calvary" when his lover Madeleine (played by Sarah Bernhardt) pleads for his life and turns the workers back to the strike, which ends in a bloodbath. The plot compared all leaders (religious, capitalist, political, even anarchist) as similarly bad. One year later, Mirbeau's dedication to the novel Torture Garden says it again: "To the priests, the soldiers, the judges; to those people who educate, instruct and govern men; I dedicate these pages of Murder and Blood." The intense interest of anarchist critics and theater groups was critical in promoting the iconoclastic playwright Henrik Ibsen to international audiences.

After the 1901 killing of President McKinley by Leon Czolgosz, (an emotionally depressed working man who had attended a few anarchist meetings), religious leaders attacked anarchists. Among the countless examples was Rev. Russell H. Conwell, a leading Philadelphia Baptist and founder of Temple University, who said from his pulpit that

either the anarchists must be exterminated from the country or the government must die. There is no middle ground. ... We must keep out of the country, or send out of the country, or hang from the gallows every man who does not believe in a government founded on the Ten Commandments and the moral law established by Jesus Christ. He has no right to live, he is an enemy to Society.

The struggle between secularists and the church for control over education climaxed with the martyrdom of anarchist Francisco Ferrer, the guiding spirit of the International League for the Rational Education of Children and head of Barcelona's Escuela Moderna. After a ruthless campaign against Ferrer and his work, Catholic and Spanish authorities conspired clumsily to frame him for involvement in an insurrection. His execution on Oct. 13, 1909, sparked worldwide outrage (with demonstrations and riots in many cities), and the educator became a clear martyr for his cause. The affair intensified the anticlerical movement, and Ferrer Modern Schools were established by anarchists all over the world, most successfully in the United States. Ferrer's anarchism, however, was itself a bone of contention within the secular movement, with shouting matches erupting between pro-Ferrer speakers and anti-anarchists at secularist meetings.

In the early decades of the Christian-Capitalist war against perceived demons under the Comstock Postal Act of 1873, the best-known among its thousands of targets were anarchist writers, editors and publishers for discussions of human sexuality on rationalist terms. This included the arrests (and some prison terms) of Lois Waisbrooker (1894, 1902), Ezra Hayward (1878, '82, '90) and Moses Harman (1887, '90, '96, 1905), who published the "Weekly Anarchist-Freethought Journal" Lucifer the LightBearer. Lillian Harman and Edwin C. Walker were imprisoned in 1887 in Kansas for declaring a 'free marriage" to each other on their own authority.

More recently, the early months of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 saw extreme actions on both sides. Priests opened their churches to fascist insurgents, and in some cases opened fire on workers from the steeples themselves. Several thousand priests and some nuns were lynched in the Republican zone, most frequently in areas held by anarchist militias. Crowds spontaneously
set fire to churches, and the tombs of clergy were opened, the nuns' skeletons propped against walls with cigarettes in the mouth, imitating prostitutes. The skull of one saint, removed from his casket on the altar, was used as a soccer ball in front of the church bearing his name. In the Nationalist zone, Catholic priests wearing side-arms demanded "confessions" from anarchists and other "reds" who waited to be executed by the thousands. The hatred between citizen and church had developed from the Vatican's loyalty to factory owners during strikes, and periods when each side simply murdered its opponents' operatives along Spanish streets.

Local U.S. examples of anarchist resistance to religion are many, but Viroqua Daniels and Chaim Weinberg should serve the purpose here. Daniels (1859-1942) was an anarchist-communist poet of California whose writings describe the rural poor who became paralyzed, crazed by anxiety and heartbreak, killed by workplace accidents, starvation or suicide. Weinberg (1861-1939) was a union organizer and public speaker whose story-telling abilities became legend among Jewish immigrants in the United States. Both Daniels and Weinberg were public atheists for all of their lives.

Some anarchists understand famous religious personalities as anarchists. Ross Winn (1871-1912) of the Southern United States believed that the teachings attributed to Jesus were generally similar to his own moral values, but that the Church and State had twisted them into instruments of control. "I suppose some people will object if I call Jesus an anarchist," Winn wrote in 1902, "but I am sure the whole world would call him that if he lived today, and preached such doctrines." In some cases, distinct varieties of anarchism develop around a Jesus-fixation and may blur the point at which the freethought ends and religion begins. The writings of Leo Tolstoy in his late years had this effect within the anarchist movement, attracting many distinguished thinkers and having a vast influence worldwide against violence, militarism and patriotism. Another major anarchist leader who held mystical, Christian-derived convictions was the French geographer Elisee Reclus (1830-1904), although these never conflicted with his anarchism.

The Catholic Worker movement is often understood to be anarchist. Founded by lay Catholics Dorothy Day and Peter Morin in 1933, members of that faith-based anti-poverty movement today are not connected in any way to the Vatican, and many have no Christian background whatsoever. The movement consists of small, task-oriented groups with a focus on nonviolent methods. A group needs no permission to call themselves Catholic Workers and establish an operation under the name. However, Day herself proclaimed her fealty to the pope, and to the church's teachings on questions such as abortion and birth control. While the Catholic Worker movement has consistently opposed the military, even in the face of hierarchical support for militarism, the central Catholic Worker group has always looked to official teachings to justify their position.

Anarchism has always been generally atheistic, with most of its periodicals holding secular editorial positions. The idea is commonly identified, in many languages, with the slogan No God, No Master.

Sidebar
The problem of religion parallels that of authority. Any god will stand as an authority figure... and yet religious anarchists have carved out a fair, sweet world for themselves by guarding their flank with a pagan or a vague, spiritual god.

References

Bibliography


Carr, Reg. Anarchism in France: The Case of Octave Mirbeau (Montreal 1977)

Conwell, Russell H. "Responsibility for Belief" (sermon) Temple Review (Philadelphia) Sept. 20, 1901


De Cleyre, Voltairine. "Nameless" Justice (Philadelphia) Jan. 27, 1889


Linebaugh, Peter and Rediker, Marcus. The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic (Boston, 2000)


Mirbeau, Octave. Théâtre Complet édition et notes par Pierre Michel (Saint-Pierre-du-Mont, 1999)

Most, Johann. Die Gottespest/ The God Pestilence (New York, 1883; Tuscon AZ, 1992)


Sanchez, José M. The Spanish Civil War as a Religious Tragedy (Notre Dame IN, 1987)

Sears, Hal D. The Sex Radicals: Free Love in High Victorian America (Lawrence KS, 1977)

S[lifer], Shaun et al. Ross Winn: Digging Up a Tennessee Anarchist (Pittsburgh, 2004)


This article is adapted from Helms' entry on the subject in The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief (Prometheus, 2007).

Helms' Dead Anarchists web site has recently added a section devoted to the dissident preacher Hugh O. Pentecost (1848-1907), who left his pulpit in 1887 after denouncing the Haymarket executions. He then created an independent and secular "Unity Congregation," to which he delivered sermon-like lectures on social issues and the abuses of clergy and government on a weekly basis for four years. This was Pentecost's anarchist period, and the site presents seven of the lectures and a biographical essay.

See: www.deadanarchists.org/Pentecost/Pentecostindex.html

Copyright Editorial Collective Winter 2008

Word count: 2501

Indexing (details)

Cite
Subject
Anarchism;
Religion;
Atheism;
Church & state;
Secularism
Title
Anarchism & Religion
Author
Helms, Robert P
Publication title
Anarcho - Syndicalist Review
Issue
48/49
Pages
24-26
Number of pages
3
Publication year
2008
Publication date
Winter 2008
Year
2008
Publisher
Editorial Collective
Place of publication
Champaign
Country of publication
United States
Journal subject
Business And Economics--Labor And Industrial Relations, Political Science
ISSN
10691995
Source type
Magazines
Language of publication
English
Document type
Commentary
Document feature
References
ProQuest document ID
199236963
Document URL
http://search.proquest.com/docview/199236963?accountid=7117
Copyright
Copyright Editorial Collective Winter 2008
Last updated
2010-06-06
Database
Alt-PressWatch