Some years ago in the pages of Freedom, long before the religion of Islam became a political issue, I wrote a short note on the "Anarchists of Islam." I mentioned the fact that although politics and religion are intrinsically connected in Islam, there is a tradition of "rebel Islam," and that one particular sect, the Kharijites, were essentially anarchists believing that "power belongs only to God." There is also a saying of the prophet which suggests that the nearer one is to government, the further one is from God. Yet in a recent issue of Freedom, "Class War" stridently proclaimed that it is "proud" to be described as Islamophobic - expressing its opposition not only to Islam, but to all forms of religious expression. The term Islamophobia, it is worth noting, was first used by Islamic fundamentalists in Iran to describe Muslim women who refused to wear the veil. There are then many forms of Islam, as there are many kinds of anarchism.

Anarchism as a political tradition has always held an ambivalent relationship towards religion, mainly because anarchists have long recognized - long before Paul Chambers - that religious ideas and practices may not only bolster state power and sustain systems of exploitation (as well as being institutions of oppression in themselves - witness the Catholic Church) but also in certain contexts may serve as religions of revolt. Anarchists have therefore long embraced the dissenting traditions within Christianity, and have paid homage to the likes of Gerrard Winstanley, William Blake and Tom Paine. Indeed many anarchists have themselves adopted a religious metaphysic. Mention may be made of Leo Tolstoy, Nicolas Berdyaev, Aurobindo Bose (described in my "Ecology and Anarchism"), Dorothy Day and Mohandas Gandhi.

It is in this context that the current issue of Anarchist Studies (14/1) is of particular interest, for it brings to the fore the divergent attitudes that anarchists have expressed towards religion, and it explores, in particular, the relationship of anarchism towards Islam. The issue is focused around a seminal paper written by its editor, Sharif Gemie. Entitled "The Trial of Fatima: Anarchists, Muslims, and the Monde Libertaire 2003-2005," the paper presents a critique of the ideas and attitudes expressed in the columns of Le Monde Libertaire. This is the weekly periodical of the Fédération Anarchiste based in Paris. Evidently, during the period 2003-2005, many articles in the periodical expressed an extreme hostility towards Islam, as well as supporting the French state in its legal prohibition of the wearing of headscarves by young Muslim women in French schools. Sharif Gemie points that this prohibition is intrinsically linked to the French notion of laïcité, the ideal of a secular public sphere free of religious influence. In fact, he notes that among anarchists, a particularly militant strand of anti-clericalism developed in France, directed against the influence of the Catholic Church on schooling, and its frequent support for right-wing political causes. What troubled Gemie was that in a context in which the hegemony of the American empire was being justified through the use of anti-Islamic slogans, and the far-right were exploiting anti-Muslim sentiments, it was despairing to see anarchists expressing support for state repression. The universalism of the Enlightenment, to which the French anarchists continually appealed, had little to do with promoting human values or cross-cultural understanding. Gemie suggests; it only expressed a narrow, nationalistic, blinkered form of French particularism. It thus had more to do with identity politics than the radical universalism of the Enlightenment.
The remainder of this issue of Anarchist Studies is devoted to a number of discussion papers, all of which offer thoughtful reflections and observations on Sharif Gemie’s critique of the French anarchists associated with Le Monde Libertaire. Only one of these contributors, Ronald Creagh, offers support for the French anarchists, emphasizing that in Islam no distinction is made between religion and culture, and stressing that the "Union of French Islamic Organizations" is indeed a fundamentalist organization. Sharif Gemie mentions this Union in his paper, denies that it is fundamentalist, even questioning the validity of the label used. A fundamentalist, I always thought, is someone who imposes on others their own religious dogma and moral edicts by means of state power or other forms of coercive violence (see The Raven 27, 1994 for some interesting and informative discussions of fundamentalism). By this criteria, the Union of French Islamic Organizations is indeed fundamentalist, declaring that the "Quran is our constitution."

Also affirming that this organization is fundamentalist, George Ubbiali contends that any progressive form of politics must challenge such reactionary organizations. It is not a question, he writes, of denouncing Islam, but of repudiating all those currents within Islam which are incompatible with the progressive ideals of anarchism.

Many of the contributors emphasize that Islam is not a monolithic system, and, like all religions, takes many different forms. Thus, as both Paul Chambers and Beltran Roca stress, religion in certain historical contexts - and this applies equally to Islam - can be interpreted as a progressive force. This is hardly news. Anthropologists and Marxists have been stressing this for generations, emphasizing that religion may be an oppressive force upholding systems of power, as well as being a catalyst for revolt (see my book Religion and Anthropology, 2006).

Harold Barclay, who has conducted anthropological research in Egypt, while acknowledging that Islam has traditionally been associated with authoritarian structures, notes in his response that the religion itself is highly decentralized, and regrets the tendency of some anarchists to view all things Muslim as intrinsically evil. Support for the state regulation of dress by some French anarchists, Barclay writes, is clearly contrary to anarchist theory and practice. But Barclay firmly denies that he is an "apologist for Islam."

But in emphasizing the "polyvalence" of religion, and the fact that Islam contains, as he puts it, "a multiplicity of liberatory elements," Beltran Roca almost ends up denying the reactionary aspects of radical Islam. Even though, throughout its history, Islam has always formed a symbiotic relationship with the state. Religion, Roca informs us, is not the "opium of the people." Yet again, throughout history, religion - including Islam - has been largely an oppressive institution, supporting state power and all forms of authority and exploitation. There never was a tyrant who did not appeal to religion in some form to justify his position. Roca also has the quaint idea that until Foucault came upon the scene, anarchists recognized only coercive power. This represents a complete misunderstanding of the anarchist tradition, as I tried to show in my book on Kropotkin, which has a long discussion of Foucault (Kropotkin: The Politics of Community, 2004). It is also worth pointing out that when Foucault described power as "productive" he was not referring to something benign and creative, but to forms of power exercised by the modern state and industrial capitalism biopower, surveillance, discipline, governmentality, pastoral power. This is the reason why, long before Foucault, anarchists were critiquing the "productive" modality of power called religion. What is important, however, about Roca's contribution is that although he makes some rather derogatory remarks about anarchism
and the Enlightenment (following the academic fashion!), in fact - contradicting himself - he pleads that we must defend the values of the Enlightenment: liberty, equality and fraternity. Equally important, while emphasizing the importance of upholding cultural diversity - as does L. Susan Brown - Roca also stresses that cultural relativism, if taken to extremes, can degenerate into a dangerous, reactionary force. Indeed, in spite of all the rhetoric about "difference" and cultural "identity," and the continual denigration of the Enlightenment and universal values, one has to acknowledge that identity politics and the emphasis on "difference" has its dark side. This is manifested in fascism, racism, nationalism, ethnic violence and, of course, religious fundamentalism. It has always troubled me to see anarchists joining the ranks of De Maistre, Hitler, and Mussolini in denouncing the radical values of the Enlightenment tradition.

What is troubling, then, about the current issue of Anarchist Studies is that although it makes great play on the positive role of "diversity" and the progressive aspects of religion, specifically Islam, it completely underplays the reactionary and oppressive nature of religion. Yet in the 21st century, religion is only rarely linked with radical politics; it is mainly linked with bigotry, intolerance, and support for oppressive regimes and reactionary and authoritarian politics. For example: in Sri Lanka, Buddhism has become closely identified with the state and with Sinhalese nationalism, leading scholars like Tambiah to write about the "betrayal" of Buddhism, for, like anarchism, Buddhism has always expressed universal human values. Bush's regime in the United States, the most powerful state in the world, is bolstered and kept in power by a bigoted and powerful fundamentalist Christian lobby. This lobby is anti-feminism, anti-homosexuals, anti-ecology, and anti-Darwin. Bush, like Blair, claims to have a hot line to God. Likewise, in India, a militant and violent form of religious ideology, Hindutva, has been in the resurgence, a form of Hindu nationalism intrinsically linked to a nuclear state and the advocacy of free-market capitalism. And, finally, of course, in Islamic states like Saudi Arabia and Iran, whatever their doctrinal differences, a fundamentalist form of Islam is currently practiced. Now widespread, especially in Africa, and supported by these states, a radical form of Islam is now afoot, one that envisages an Islamic state (a theocracy) and the implementation of Sharia law. Such a law sanctions by divine edict the murder of apostates (Muslims who reject their faith), the stoning or flogging of adulterous women, the persecution of homosexuals and any writers or artists who dare to criticize Islam. Muslim clerics are free to denounce secularism, but woe betide anyone criticizing Islam. We are in fact seeing throughout the world an unholy alliance (if I may be allowed such an expression) between religion and both capitalism and authoritarian politics. These are the "sombre trinity" of which Flores Magon wrote - state, capital and religion.

Anarchism has always championed both universalism, the importance of human values, and cultural diversity. And in defending Muslim women against state repression and expressing solidarity with the oppressed, anarchists should not go to the other extreme and become apologists for religion. Still less, as Paul Chambers implies, should they become a "cheerleader" for the faith. Supporting individual Muslims in their struggles does not imply that we should adopt a religious metaphysic, nor that we should kow-tow, like the Socialist Workers' Party, to radical Muslim clerics. We should repudiate both God (religion) and Mammon (capitalism).
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