

Why “No Gods” – How To Avoid Atheist Zealotry

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Talking about “Christianity” is difficult; Christianity is *the* largest religion in the world, comprising a multitude of denominations, regional variants, and political projects – each with their own complicated histories and specific contexts to unpack. This means that any statement or conclusion with the words “all” or “most” will necessarily miss something, even in the most nuanced discussions on the subject. I want to admit this limitation from the outset not only to mitigate accusations of misrepresentation, but to contrast this text against its primary target: White Christian Nationalism. Easy as it may seem to debunk the ideology of celebrity QAnon cultists and right-wing terrorists, we have a lot to discuss before we can meaningfully counter this clear and present danger. To start, let’s talk about God.

Whose God Is It Anyway?

Jacques Ellul, the late sociologist, theologian, and noted Christian anarchist, had this to say about the biblical God:

“In the Bible, however, we find a God who escapes us totally, whom we absolutely cannot influence, or dominate, much less punish; a God who reveals Himself when He wants to reveal Himself, a God who is very often in a place where He is not expected, a God who is truly beyond our grasp. Thus, the human religious feeling is not at all satisfied by this situation... God descends to humanity and joins us where we are.”

The “mysterious ways” line has been abused to no end, and is rightly maligned when it is used to justify mass atrocities and personal tragedy. If we take the idea that “God works in mysterious ways” seriously, we must confront Ellul’s main thesis: this omnipotent and omnipresent thing is completely, *totally* mysterious, a being with His own interests and desires that we can’t predict, represent, or even perceive most of the time. The mystery of God isn’t one we as non-Gods can solve, just as the mystery of any individual’s “nature” isn’t anyone’s concern but their own. God’s cause is the divine, our cause is our own, and neither can be made general; each is unique.

My argument here is not that Ellul is objectively right on “the God question,” and I doubt any serious Ellulian would make this claim either. This citation instead serves two purposes; first, to provide evidence to counter the bad-faith claim that **all** notions of God are inherently hierarchical (an easy enough argument to dismantle); and second, to lay the foundation for how to directly challenge self-proclaimed Christians on theological grounds.

Consider the following line of questioning: If God works in mysterious ways, how is it that His position on abortion, homosexuality, marriage, and civil rights can be reduced to unambiguous disapproval? How can any of us truly know what God wants?

These questions cut much deeper than rote demands for proof of God because they treat believers as peers who disagree, rather than deluded followers or conscious grifters. No, this won't logic anyone out of a belief they didn't logic themselves into, but that isn't the point; we're treating the believer as a person with a complex system of thoughts, feelings, and commitments that, while not necessarily valid or consistent with current scientific consensus, are worth consideration.

This is the base assumption of religious freedom: individuals can choose to believe whatever they want, provided the free pursuit thereof doesn't tread on anyone else. Add free association to the mix and you get the basic foundation for organizations, be they Buddhist monasteries or rational atheist drinking clubs. With no special privileges provided to any one group via tax exemption, subsidy, or political favor, the risk of militancy, dominionism, and consolidation is resigned to the margins – assuming anarchic conditions.

Nationalism is not the product of this type of religious freedom, and nationalists are fully aware of this. Gary North, a leading figure in the Christian reconstructionist movement, said as much in an interview with Reason magazine:

“So let us be blunt about it... we must use the doctrine of religious liberty to gain independence for Christian schools until we train up a generation of people who know that there is no religious neutrality, no neutral law, no neutral education, and no neutral civil government. Then they will get busy in constructing a Bible-based social, political and religious order which finally denies the religious liberty of the enemies of God.”

In other words, North does not believe in religious liberty beyond its utility as a Trojan horse for authority over the “enemies of God.” Attempting to rhetorically ground reactionary goals in individual freedom is pulled straight from the paleolibertarian handbook: use libertarian premises to argue for reactionary ends, all the while insisting that they are the *only* valid conclusion of freedom. A perfect example of this is “libertarianism,” a term whose radical implications have long been overshadowed by its use among the far right, making difficult its capacity for genuinely liberatory positions. This is why reactionaries love using “liberty” to describe their ideas: a lot of us will take them at their word and assume “liberty” is always code for sinister ends. As any anarchist worth listening to will tell you, this is a complete lie; the exercise of individual freedom is a direct threat to reactionaries, hence why they do everything in their power to restrict it.

Just as we shouldn't buy into the dangerous myth that “liberty” leads to traditional social order, it's perhaps even more harmful to agree with white Christian nationalists that freedom of religion invariably concludes with theocracy – not least because that's obviously false. White Christian nationalism doesn't benefit the millions of queer, disabled, Black and POC, and migrant Christians currently being targeted by the genocidal efforts carried out in the name of Christ. It is a project whose sole priority is domination, control, and loyalty to the nation. To argue

against Christian nationalism on the grounds that Christianity is the problem is to grant christofascists the right to represent all Christians – a dangerous mistake that far too many of us are falling for right now.

Anti-theism: A Case Study in Misdirection

While the intolerance of New Atheism is merely implied, anti-theism leads with it. The problem, from the anti-theist perspective, is that belief in religion or the “supernatural” is an inherent threat to freedom such that any liberatory project must be adamantly secular, materialistic, and rational to the explicit exclusion of religion-as-belief to avoid the inevitable creation of a theocracy. Where atheists might acknowledge a domain in which faith can truly be individual, anti-theists condemn all faith as a slippery slope to literal fascism – a trajectory that the US is currently going down for what appears to be this exact reason. To the anti-theist, religion is not something the Church has distorted to its own ends, but rather its logical conclusion, therefore demanding the conversion of believers into non-believers through re-education. This is far from a comprehensive account of all anti-theism, but from my own conversations with self-identified proponents and from general observation, it’s a workable definition.

In my view, this perspective is just wrong, but that really doesn’t bother me; people are wrong all the time, a basic consequence of free thought that we’ll be dealing with until our next extinction-level event or the singularity (whichever comes first). What genuinely disturbs me is its persistent incuriosity; its rhetorical appeals to progress and empirical science aren’t made out of a genuine appreciation for nuanced investigation, but out of spite for institutions and individuals that stand in opposition to the aesthetic of science and rationality. This might be why so many anti-theists struggle to define “religion” in a way that doesn’t primarily target evangelical Christians, traditionalist Catholics, and QAnon cultists.

Unsurprisingly, many radical socialists, anarchists, and religious scholars have trouble interacting with anti-theists in any serious capacity, as it usually becomes clear that these folks don’t actually care about nuanced engagement with historical record, religious studies, or anthropology. Most often, anti-theism is a misplaced vitriolic reaction to the violence committed by the Church, its abusive Clergy, and its vigilante crusaders. Anti-theism places the blame not on the institutions and individuals involved, but on the God they claim to understand. This suggests an unironic belief that all Christians believe in the exact same God. To say all Christians pray to the exact same God is like saying all anti-capitalists have the exact same definition of capitalism: it’s demonstrably false to such an extent you’d literally have to *never* interact with a single one in order to genuinely make that argument.

Anti-theists make the phenomenal mistake of taking reactionary zealots at their word when they claim to have read the Bible accurately and insist that they're doing God's work.. Consider for a moment why secular reactionaries have so much audience crossover with Televangelists and alt-lite youth pastors – while the rhetoric may differ, they're effectively both saying that America is a white Christian nation under siege by an anti-white, anti-Christian Other. Religious or otherwise, **they are not telling us what they actually believe.** They do not care about protecting Christians and they do not care about enacting God's will; all they want is for people who *do* care to buy into their scheme, to believe that “the enemies of God” are their responsibility to eradicate. Widening the gap between religion and the left does nothing but help the reactionary cause at the expense of genuine believers.

It would be a stretch to say currently existing anti-theism and the New Atheist movement are a deliberate psyop meant to turn atheists into monsters – so much so it feels scummy to even write that out – but given how easily the “rational skeptics” of the early 2010s slipped into populist conservatism, I wouldn't blame conspiracists for jumping to that conclusion. The grim reality is that this wasn't a centralized effort, but rather a misdirection of legitimate grievances into an atheism that enthusiastically embodies that which it seeks to destroy: an evangelical movement working to establish dominion of the right over the wrong.

Why “No Gods”

All that being said, where does that leave “No Gods, No Masters” as a statement? Is it time for a rewrite?

First, we'll do some contextualization, and then we'll discuss why such a thing isn't necessary. What we mean by “No Gods” isn't a literal declaration of “No Gods Allowed,” just as “No Masters” isn't a slight against doms, child-rearing, or “mastery” of a given skill. “No Masters” voices the desire for a world without rulers, an economy absent capitalist privilege, and a life lived free from systems of power. This is, in most cases, how the full slogan is employed: a vocal commitment to the negation of domination and rulership. The process of conceptualizing and achieving this goal goes beyond strict adherence to this statement, involving many subordinate discussions of economics, philosophy, and institutional structure that may, if read literally, contradict our snappier platitudes. Need I mention how much blood, sweat, and tears are spent explaining how “anarchy” needn't be “a state of chaos and disorder”? That alone should demonstrate the importance of context in understanding what we actually believe.

With consideration to its present use by anarchists and special attention to context, “No Gods, No Masters” is a statement against authority – whether divine or secular – from which follows firm advocacy of total autonomy for all, the end of

the state, and liberation from all systems of domination. It does *not* follow that all religion is therefore authoritarian. As discussed earlier, total freedom of religion, just like freedom of speech and association, is a core anarchist position that, taken consistently alongside other principles, undermines authoritarianism and domination.

Given the choice between secular -archy and religious -archy, the anarchist sees no meaningful difference beyond the language with which the rulers justify their position and which groups are targeted by their genocidal pyramid scheme. Neither one is being honest about its intentions, it's only about power.

The Armor of Solidarity

The current rise of White Christian Nationalism in the US has already reaped dire consequences; *Roe v. Wade* was overturned less than a year ago, same-sex marriage is on the chopping block, and a coalition of literal Nazis, paramilitarists, and theocrats captivate an audience of millions on major news networks. Rather than practicing class consciousness, people have found god — not capital-G God, of course, but a poor imitator designed by campaign managers, mainstream pundits, and the reactionary media machine for the purpose of defending power. The gospel of alt-right bloggers, QAnon conspiracists, and, I must stress, **literal Nazis**, is not one most people pray to. Despite how it often seems, most Christians on this earth are not white supremacists; when christofascists and their enablers say “God is on my side,” they are lying, deferring the responsibility for their hatred to all Christians. This is something the Nazis (past and present) have always done: co-opt cultural symbols, religious texts, and political positions, strip them of original context, and incorporate them into their totalitarian worldview. Why else do you think they called themselves national *socialists*? Now that Christian nationalism is the hot new trend for mainstream conservative figures, there's space for people to identify as opponents to theocracy. That opposition *can not* rest on the platform “Christianity bad, fuck Christians, burn your local church” lest we wish to resign our religious allies to a slow death at the hands of a state we wrongly assume is helping them. White nationalism, Christian or otherwise, is a threat to everyone, including our religious peers. We can't win this fight alone.

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