

RELIGION AND THE LEFT

BY RHYD WILDERMUTH



A little more than twenty years ago, I visited my father in Ohio. I was living in Seattle at the time, blissfully enveloped in the gay and leftist bubble of Capitol Hill, the ‘gay ghetto’ as it was sometimes called.

It had been years since I’d been back to the land which birthed me, and I wasn’t really thrilled to be there. I’d left when I was 12, after my father had divorced my schizophrenic and developmentally-disabled mother who then moved myself and my sisters to south Florida. So, all my teenage years—as well as early 20’s—had been lived far from what I thought was the bizarre “backwards” world of Appalachia and its inhabitants.

Even before puberty, I’d come to develop an intellectual distance from that particular culture. I’ve tried repeatedly to understand precisely where it came from and I still don’t fully know, but I really didn’t like the people around me. I found them stupid, uneducated, and I believed I was better than them.

Actually, I do have a theory as to why I felt that way. *I didn't fit in.* I read a lot, really liked science and history, and didn't like any of the things my cousins or neighbors liked, the 'boy things' like hunting, fishing, and sports. I don't really know if they thought I was odd, but I definitely felt I was. I saw myself as deeply different from them, like there was something about me that didn't fit into their world.

So I developed a belief as a coping mechanism to accommodate that alienation. I didn't just like different things, but I myself was different, and that difference meant I was better than them. Because I knew things they didn't know, I had a "superior" intelligence, and because I didn't do the aggressive and risky boy things they did, I was a different kind of boy or maybe not even a boy at all.

I remember that sense of distinction and difference sharpened the year I started puberty, which is really the worst moment for a human being. At the same time, my parents were always fighting, so things at home were quite horrible. Also, we were extremely poor—not the "so poor you cannot go on vacation" sort but "so poor that the government is delivering food by truck to you" sort. That poverty also played quite a role in my sense of self at that time, and the stack of books I'd borrow from the library every month became a kind of opiate for the misery of life.

By the time we left Appalachia, that sense that I was a special kind of person had fully solidified in my mind, and it continued throughout my teenage years. It turned out that I actually was a bit "special," if by special we mean really intelligent. Having teachers who recognized this was a great thing, but it came with even more alienation and a belief that I was somehow *better* than the people I had known growing up.

RURAL "IGNORANCE" OR URBAN ELITISM?

That sense hit me hard in the face when I went to visit my father many years later. I was 24, had already lived in several cities, and styled myself a leftist radical. My father was a factory worker who had never lived in a city and never knew what I was talking about.

There are a few amusing stories from that visit you might find funny. At the time, he was married to a deeply religious woman who had never finished high school. We didn't get along so well, as she thought I was a satanist and I just thought she was really, really dumb.

I stayed with them in their house, which was in a run-down former factory town utterly destroyed by NAFTA. Half the people there had no work, while the others were all driving 60 miles to work in one of the few factories still running. To my initial relief, though, there was a small branch library in the town, staffed almost entirely by women without college degrees. Thanks to Clinton's "welfare-to-work" policies, they had to find jobs in order to keep receiving welfare benefits, and anyway there were no better qualified people in the town to take those jobs as no one else had college degrees, either.

The first amusing story involves that library. I was quite excited to visit it, and then completely depressed to see how very few adult books it actually had on its shelves. Most of the books were children's books, but there was also a very long shelf of Christian fiction and Christian romance, with a few "secular" crime and mystery titles. The reference shelves looked like despair itself, mostly cookbooks, two atlases, and a handful of dictionaries and books on Ohio state law.

I asked the woman working at the desk for the title I'd been hoping to borrow, *To The Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. It had been assigned for a class when I was in school, but I had never gotten around to reading it, and for some reason really wanted to now.

"You want three books?"

I shook my head in confusion. "No, just one."

"I don't reckon we got a book about lighthouses, wolves, and Virginia. You know what it's called?"

It all really could have been a comedy script. Eventually I did get the book. The actual librarian, who floated between several different branch libraries, was in the next day and told me she would order a copy for the library. That book, of course, is quite beautiful and became one of my favorite books. It also helped me get through the next moment of culture shock during my visit.

As I mentioned, my father's then-wife was deeply religious and not very well educated. In fact, she'd never lived anywhere else except that town and one nearby. Also, she was deeply against alcohol, and I wasn't allowed to have any in the house while I stayed with them. That was fine for me, actually, as there were only three or four beers you could buy at the small grocery store in the town, and they all tasted like diluted urine.

My 25th birthday occurred while I visited them, and my father drove the three of us to the fanciest restaurant within a 30 mile radius, an Olive Garden. For those of you unfamiliar with the wasteland of American corporate chain restaurants, it's an Italian restaurant where they give you free salad and bread sticks and that's a really, really, really big deal if you're poor.

Also for those unfamiliar with the hinterlands, it's worth knowing something else that's crucial to this story. At that time, at least, there were only really two different brands of coffee you could purchase in most grocery stores: Folgers or Maxwell House. Both are pretty awful, though you wouldn't know that if they are the only ones you'd encountered. I did, unfortunately, as I'd been living in Seattle.

So, during three months of staying with my father I'd had nothing approximating what I considered real coffee, and one of the first things I noticed when we entered the restaurant was an espresso machine. This moment felt like a gift from the gods, or a love letter from urban civilization.

When the waiter arrived, I ordered a cappuccino, since it was the only espresso drink on their menu. Extremely excited, and it anyway being my birthday, before he left the table I then asked if it

were possible to have two espresso shots in the drink, rather than one. ‘It’s been a really long time, man” I said, as if I were a straight male prisoner propositioning a cell mate.

As I waited, I suddenly noticed the knuckles of my father’s wife had gone completely white. She was gripping the edge of the table as if a storm was blowing through ready to sweep her away.

“What’s wrong?” my father asked her.

She answered through clenched teeth. “I said no alcohol while he stays here.”

My father looked as confused as I did, and it wasn’t until my cappuccino arrived that we figured out what had made her so angry. “He ordered two shots,” she said, gesturing towards it. And even after I explained that they were *shots of espresso*, she was still angry, because she had assumed espresso was an alcohol she had never heard of.

I only stayed another month there before traveling again, and my father only stayed another year with her. Towards the end of my stay, he’d offered to drive me to the nearest college town because I was really miserable. There was an actual coffeeshop there, he’d heard, and also an amish grocery where I could get some of “that organic food you keep complaining you can’t find here.” He was right, and it was a good day with him, but there’s something I remember particularly during that long drive which really made me understand something about the condition of people there.

We had passed a billboard along the way, a colorful one depicting Jesus and a quote from the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus is holding his hands out while floating in the clouds, and he looks kind and caring, while in large white letters enclosed in quotation marks are his words:

“Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

The lettering was not uniform, however. The last five words were bold and much larger than all the others except for the “me” towards the beginning which was capitalised. It looked a bit like this:

“Come unto **ME**, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and **I will give you rest.**”

I asked my dad about it, and he told me those billboards were very common. They were part of an anti-union campaign that had started right around the time that the factories had begun to lay off large numbers of workers due to NAFTA.

THE ROOTS OF LEFTIST URBAN ELITISM

As I mentioned, I had developed a kind of intellectual distancing from the people there which had only gotten worse during my stay. The woman working at the library who didn’t know who Virginia Woolf was, my father’s wife and her ignorance about espresso, and countless other incidents all contributed to a larger narrative about myself and the idiocy of others. These people were all backwards and stupid, while those of us in the cities, or at least those in the cities who were similar to me, were part of a different order of human beings, enlightened, progressive, “radical.”

Encountering that billboard suddenly forced me to question all that. It was clear propaganda, and extremely subtle. It was an “innocent” quote from the Bible operating on a level of symbolic meaning that few except poets usually access. My dad only knew it was anti-union propaganda because he was working a union job and the shop stewards had talked about it. Most wouldn’t have caught on to that or noticed the subtle statement, “*you don’t need a labor union, you just need Jesus.*”

I’m going to guess that you probably laughed along at the stories I recounted, just as I still laugh. Or maybe you rolled your eyes or shook your head, which is what I often do when I think about it all. These are indeed amusing, and these kinds of misunderstandings form the core mechanism of a lot of humor.

Unfortunately, there’s also an arrogance that can re-narrate these moments into something much less funny. The sort of “liberal” or “urban” elitism that is endemic to American politics is built upon these narrations, painting entire groups of people as lesser than others, too stupid to know the difference between a shot of vodka and a shot of espresso, too imbecilic to know that Virginia Woolf is an author, and too primitive to ever question their religious beliefs. Those people are “hicks” living in “flyover” states, and it’s safer to keep such people contained and entertained rather than ever let them have any political power.

Unfortunately, much of leftist, radical, and “social justice” politics is also founded on this narrative. Rural poor people—especially whites, but also devout Catholic hispanics and devout Pentecostal blacks—all represent an amorphous, faceless enemy that will become “fascist” if they’re not stopped. After all, it was they—and not the enlightened urbanites—who voted for Trump rather than Hillary in 2016. They are also the ones who vote for politicians who vow to stop critical race theory in schools and limit sports women’s sports participation to biological sex rather than declared gender.

This condescending divide isn’t a new feature of politics, however: it’s a hold-over from older leftist movements, especially anarchism, which merely reproduced bourgeois (urban) Protestant moral constellations. Back then—as also now—peasants farming outside the towns were seen by the city dwellers as dirty and stupid. They were still eating root vegetables and baking with unrefined flour and still holding to old beliefs. Also, they couldn’t read, while the enlightened town dwellers were doing accounting, practicing law and medicine, buying imported spices and teas arriving from the colonies, and they had all had a new understanding of the world that was “superior” to the older one.

Anarchism was—and still is—a primarily urban movement, as was Marxism, and both picked up aspects of this bourgeois moral constellation in their founding. From this perspective, rural people were backwards and superstitious and especially reactionary. If they were ever to be liberated, they would first need to give up their own moral constellations, especially their religious beliefs. Since

this was such an overwhelming task, revolution would need to occur in the cities and be first enacted by the already-enlightened until the unwashed masses could be liberated as well.

These ideas absolutely still persist in leftism despite the obvious problem this narrative ignores. That problem is that there are many more of these sorts of people than there are urbanites converted to leftist ideas. Marxism at least acknowledges this, and earlier labor movements recognised that not only was it possible to organise rural workers, but also that no union movement could survive without support from those workers.

The Marxist focus on material conditions is what allowed organized labor to become a significant force in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States, while anarchism has always remained a small and relatively powerless movement with the sole exception of the International Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) in the early 20th century. However, even then the success of the Wobblies was only possible because they, following the lead of Marxist unions, focused on the material conditions of workers rather than first attempting to convert workers to a bourgeois moral framework. In other words, you did not have to first renounce your religious beliefs or cultural understanding in order to get higher wages or an eight-hour work day.

Unlike the way radical politics often functions now, labor organising understood that a worker would not need to subscribe to an entire leftist programme or set of doctrines to be seen as a participant in collective action. Even though the Marxist framework that informed these movements was essentially atheist and materialist, you did not need to affirm either of these points, nor did you need to accept more esoteric and corollary ideas about family relations, the history of primitive accumulation, or questions about “permanent revolution” and the need for a “vanguard” party.

RADICALISM AND RELIGION

The very simplicity of that older form of leftist organizing is what led to its many successes early on. It's much easier to explain to a person that their boss is paying them less than they deserve than it is convince them there is no god. Explaining to someone that other people are in the very same position they are, and that if they all work together they can force the bosses to listen to them, is a concrete argument that has direct relevance to their daily lives.

That is, it doesn't require a person to accept an entire cultural framework in which such ideas make sense. You can believe Jesus was born of a virgin and also believe that your boss should pay you more without any contradiction at all. In fact, in many ways the already-existing cultural framework of Christianity, at least in its more populist manifestations, often provided the very metaphors and slogans many the poor had used to express their revolutionary desires both before and after the birth of leftism.

One of the oldest manifestations of this was the phrase originating from John Bell in the 14th century and later repeated throughout the following centuries:

*“When Adam delved and Eve span
Who then was the gentelman?”*

Later, the Levelers and then the Chartists heavily used Christian language to express their political beliefs, but not out of a cynical ploy to convince the masses of the rightness of their cause. Instead, many within these movements were themselves what can be described as “Christian radicals,” a movement that manifested again especially in Catholic radicalism, such as the Irish Catholic Socialism of James Connolly and Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker’s movement, as well as the overtly communist framework of Catholic Liberation Theology. Of particular note as well is that the League of the Just, a catholic communist society, merged with the Communist Correspondence Society to form the Communist League, which then asked Marx and Engels to write *The Communist Manifesto*. That is, Marxism itself was fostered by an organisation informed by religious values.

Despite this, official communist and anarchist doctrines argued for the end of religion and an embrace of atheism. Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin all expressed deeply anti-religious sentiment, but the greatest hatred towards religion came from the anarchists. The phrase *No Gods No Masters* (“Ni Dieu Ni Maitre,” more correctly translated as “Neither God Nor Master”) originated in the late 1800’s from the beliefs and newspaper of French anarchist Auguste Blanqui, and was popularised internationally by the atheist anarchist Kropotkin.

Auguste Blanqui was not only a fierce atheist, but also believed that convincing the “ignorant” masses to revolt was a lost cause. Instead, he argued that revolution should be carried out by a small group of elite anarchists who force a revolutionary moment upon society. That group would then institute a “temporary” dictatorship to implement a revolutionary programme before then handing control back to the people.

Blanqui’s strain of radicalism was heavily criticized by communists of the time, especially by Marx and Engels, because at its core was a belief that the working class was too ignorant to be able to act as informed political agents. Unfortunately, despite opposition to this framework by the actual founders of Marxism, this anarchist elitism appeared again in Lenin’s iteration of vanguardism.

Vanguardism asserts that revolutionary movements must be led by a small enlightened sector of the working class who leads organizations and builds revolutionary institutions which then draw in other parts of the working classes. The purpose of such an arrangement was specifically to gate-keep revolutionary doctrine while educating away the “false consciousness” of the working classes which prevented them from understanding their revolutionary potential.

Both Blanquism (the name for this strain of anarchism) and Lenin's re-iteration of it as vanguardism are founded upon the idea that the masses are too brainwashed or uneducated to see their true material conditions. They need leaders to guide them into seeking what is best for them, and it falls upon those leaders to educate away the ignorance, superstition, and "false consciousness" of the masses.

Both these tendencies continue today in radical leftist politics, and heavily contribute to the repeated failure of leftist organizing especially in the United States. One of the most common criticisms about leftists—be they of the Marxist, anarchist, or social justice tendencies—is that they are "elitist." This is often dismissed as a mere right-wing smear, but the label would never have been able to catch hold if there were not some reality to it.

Not only are leftists often called "elitist," but they are very often seen as "urban elites" who are out of touch with the concerns of common working-class people. And again, though often shrugged off as mere propaganda, this framing has significant historical basis.

As I described earlier, I myself had developed a kind of elitist stance and intellectual distancing from the place and the people where I had been born. Part of that was absolutely a defense mechanism for a feeling of alienation, but I've also come to understand that much more of it came from my actual experience of living in a city.

A BROADER UNDERSTANDING OF RELIGION

Cities have their own cultures and their own logics, and in every city that I have lived I've encountered the same anti-rural sentiment. Rural people are not just derided but also feared, seen very often as violent and stupid people who blindly follow populist politicians and religious leaders. This perception, of course, has a corollary, since it then means urban people are enlightened, free-thinking, and intellectually superior.

The core of this divide, however, is ultimately about religious belief, but by religion I mean something a little broader than the way we often understand it. All religious frameworks are really cosmological frameworks, meaning they are founded upon a way of seeing the world and the place of humans within that world. They all have their own ontologies (the understanding of being and categories) and their own epistemologies (ways of deciding what is true). Christianity and other monotheisms posit a singular god who is the ultimate source of truth, while polytheisms posit many gods and other ways of understanding truth. Atheisms are also religious by this definition—the very act of saying "there is no god" is a statement of belief.

The kind of urban understanding of the world born from the bourgeoisie and capitalism is also a religious framework, what we might call a "civic religion." The way people relate to each other in cities, the complicated division of labor (professional vs. blue collar, for instance, or managers vs

the managed), and all the many beliefs about what constitutes a good life is often starkly different from what we often see in the rural.

Again returning to my own experience, I expected certain things from a library and the availability of certain capitalist commodities (like coffee) that were not available in the rural area to which I returned. This all seemed to me backwards and wrong: people should know certain things (like what espresso is or who Virginia Woolf is) that no one there seemed to know. I saw such knowledge as basic or elementary, and thus judged those who didn't know such things (or think such things were important to know) as ignorant.

Ultimately, this was all a moral judgment without any basis, and these kinds of judgments are they key as to why no leftist organizing has succeeded in the United States. The problem of course is that urban and rural dwellers are both exploited by capitalists, by which I mean they are paid less than the value of their labor and caught in a relentless cycle of working for others just to secure their most basic means of survival.

However, people in cities are regardless compensated better than those in rural areas. Wealth is highly concentrated in the urban, wages are higher, and the poor in cities have more access to resources than the rural poor. This points to the darkest part of urban elitism: it is ultimately derived from greater wealth and the desire to justify it in the face of the poverty of others.

To build a radical leftism that could ever hope to challenge the dominance of capitalism, urban elitist positions need to be abandoned. Rural people are not stupid or backwards, but rather just humans living in different contexts. Those contexts are often explicitly religious, but they are no more religious than the moral frameworks and beliefs of even avowedly atheist or agnostic city dwellers.

This means that leftists would need both to understand their own cosmologies, prejudices, and moral judgements and also learn to understand those of others. In other words: religion needs to be taken seriously as an essential cultural aspect of being human, rather than something everyone should eventually be liberated from.

What this would look like in practice will look somewhat different in each situation, but everywhere the core work would be the same: de-centering the cultural and religious frameworks of the urban in order to address the shared material conditions of all people, urban or rural.

That requires first of all interrogating many of the recent ideas regarding social justice that have come to be seen as primary. There are many places in which urban radicalism articulates a utopian vision of the future which not only makes little sense to rural peoples, but also become assaults on their cultural frameworks.

One example of this is "family abolition," the idea that older forms of relations through marriage, parentage, and "blood" relation should be abolished. While many people in the cities have become

disconnected and alienated from their families and thus may see the ‘nuclear family’ as a primitive or reactionary form, this view is only possible because cities force people into alternative arrangements. Few can ever afford a house in the city for a family, and thus living with your family is seen as rare or something only the wealthy do. On the other hand, family living arrangements are possible even for the poorest in rural areas, which makes this form more common.

Many such “radical” utopian ideas of the urban are actually just solutions proposed for urban problems. Thus, insisting that rural people must also accept such solutions and embrace urban social relations in order to be seen as part of a revolutionary class will always result in alienation and accusations of “elitism.” Worse than this, such insistence then opens up space for rightists political programs which claim to speak better for the concerns of rural people.

Especially, religion needs to be understood not as something humans must be liberated from, but rather as something essential to human meaning. As in the example of the anti-union billboard, the capitalists already recognise this—and manipulate it towards their own ends. But also, communist groups such as the Catholic Workers understand this too, and have worked not to abolish spirituality from the working class, but rather to expand its liberating potential.

Understanding and respecting the religious frameworks of others doesn’t require adopting them, too. What is needed most of all is a return to a sense of pluralism, one which is at its heart “polytheistic.” That doesn’t mean one must believe there are many gods, but rather understand that the gods—and religion—are in essence diverse centers of truth that do not cancel each other out but rather increase the cultural meaning of all peoples. Beyond those beliefs is the human itself and material conditions of their existence. One person might believe a god became a man and died for their sins, another might believe there are no gods at all, yet both can agree that a good life requires access to the means of survival and a fair return for their labor. We can—and must—start from there.

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