

Mystical Anarchism, a Spiritual Biography

Alnoor Ladha

Michael Lerner | You suggested we call this conversation Mystical Anarchism. What does that mean to you?

Alnoor Ladha | Well, they're two unlikely words in combination and the two words most people are triggered by. I think that's a good place to start. Mysticism is really about the direct dialogue and direct relationship to the Divine. In some ways, I think it's a more palatable word than spirituality which has been co-opted and abused. So, it's a noninstitutional spirituality, a nondogmatic pathless path.

Anarchism is equally polarizing, but for different reasons. As you know, anarchism is not anarchy. Anarchism is actually a very sophisticated political philosophy that is about subsidiarity of power: bringing power to [the places] where decisions are actually made. It's about localization of power to communities. It's about self-organization. And it's really about creativity and the human will to decide what is best for [us]. So, it's not outside of law. It's more attuned to etiquette than is the "law."

Etiquette is pre-law. It's pre-morality. It's pre-literacy. It's a way of being that is in right relation to other human beings, to Nature, to the spirits, to the more-than-human world that exists.

I like putting mysticism and anarchism together partly because the Left has lost its spiritual center. God died for the Left in the 18th century. Marxism, dialectical historicism, socialism are all reactions against institutional religion, and for good reason. As a result though, they've thrown out the baby out with the bath water.

The New Age movement, for example, lacks a political analysis and an understanding of power and the context we're [living] in as a civilization. They largely believe enlightenment is an individual pursuit. And so I think merging the two ideals of spirituality and politics, mysticism and anarchism, is a good starting place for dialogue.

Michael | I believe that you come from a Sufi family. Is that true? And you were born in Vancouver, is that correct? Tell us a little about your family of origin—where were you born and what was your family like?

Alnoor | My family on both my mom's side and dad's side are from East Africa. My mum's family is from Zanzibar and Tanzania. My dad's family are from Uganda. They are a part of the

same tribe—the Ismailis. The Assassin Order is also what they’re known as. They migrated from Arabia to Egypt. They were the Caliphs during the Fāṭimid period, and then they migrated to Persia after the fall of Cairo. While they were in exile in Persia for 500 plus years, some migrated to India, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. My dad’s family followed that migration pattern. My dad was exiled [from Uganda] in 1972 by Idi Amin. And my mum was a midwife in the UK at the time. They just randomly met in Vancouver; well I guess not so randomly. And of course being of the same community there were ways to meet. So we were all born [in Vancouver] and socialized by Canadians.

Michael | How many children?

Alnoor | Three...three brothers.

Michael | The Ismaili community is an extraordinary community.

Alnoor | In some ways they are. In some ways they’ve calcified their belief system. They went from being a very mystical Sufi sect to becoming a sort of commercial sect. That happened slowly though an alliance with the British empire [in the 1700s]. They’ve had a history of living in exile. I think that creates a deep insecurity. So when proximity to power happened in 18th century Persia, they essentially sold out their values. If you look at the Ismaili community today, most of them are pursuing commercial interests. You know, there’s a fair share in academia, etc. They’re very “successful,” in rationalist materialist terms.

The Aga Khan of the time is their Imam, their Pope. If you listen to what he says, he really pushes them to be successful in the countries they live in because they’re mostly immigrants. There is no Homeland. And so I understand the strategy, right? It’s a strategy of integration. He understands that his people live in a capitalist environment. And if you’re successful within that environment, you’re seen as *worthy*. But at the same time, there is no point of view on climate change, our current crisis, the context we’re in.

And the old immigrant ideal of pursuing wealth in order to have your overlords approval doesn’t make sense in this context. We have 10 years, maybe 20 years left of the Western way of living.

So I have a strong critique of them in that sense—both economically and spiritually. If you come from a mystical tradition, which the Ismailis do, the aim of your spiritual practice is to enter unity consciousness. When the path to get you to that unity consciousness calcifies and institutionalizes and creates a context in which you spend the majority of your time within your own community—your alms and your charity and your generosity is focused on that community—you are, therefore, creating separation. And the initial intent of unity consciousness is defeated by tribalism. And so, if our circle of empathy is not expanding through our spiritual practice, then what are we doing?

Michael | We’re going to follow two threads here and dance back and forth between them. Because I do, as I told you, want to do spiritual biography here. And so we launched in that and to your family of origin and the Ismaili tribe and its loss of its origin of seeking the Divine in unity and becoming more commercial in exile. But since you’ve raised it—your sense that we have 10 or 20 years left—what is your analysis of where we are in this world today?

Alnoor | There are multiple ways to answer this. And maybe the way I’ll go is through the historic lens. I think it’s important to preface I don’t believe there was some homeostasis of Eden, some perfect place that we left. But I do think that there was a time where we were living in deep

symbiosis with Nature. We were living in small hunter-gatherer tribal communities. We know from cultural anthropology, evolutionary biology, and evolutionary psychology that we were living in largely peaceful tribes with very little hierarchy, living quite leisurely lives. The average working time was 10 hours a week. From bone density samples, we know we were having roughly 2000 calories a day. There was no chief at the top that was the accumulator of all goods.

Marshall Sahlins calls this the “original affluent society.” The discovery, if you want to call it that, of farming and the neolithic revolution led to sedentary lifestyles, creating a situation in which we ended up “taming” Nature, if you will. We extracted and we were not “of place” in the same way. We didn’t go to the Mother for our nourishment and bounty anymore. We started to believe it was our own ingenuity that led to our being fed.

That disconnection—that original disconnection—that is the fall from Eden.

This is not to say we want to go back to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle; we don’t want to go back to the paleolithic. But we want to learn how to be *of the paleolithic* in the sense that there were psychic powers we had. There was a remembering we had. I think a lot of the grief we hold right now is also a grief of being born into a culture where that no longer exists.

We’re now in this place where we know our industrial activity—*i.e.*, globalized capitalism—is creating climate change and poverty, yet we are paralyzed to act.

One way to understand the climate catastrophe is through grief. We could stay in the grief or avoid the grief, or we could say grief is a necessary emotion in order for us to allow parts of ourselves to die. We can also be in gratitude for the parts of ourselves that are being born through the crisis. This is *a* nondualistic approach to collapse.

Michael | One of the things that struck me was that I thought it strategically powerful that when you founded The Rules you didn’t do what most people would do, which would be to select different NGOs around the world to work with. You decided to work with popular movements. I want to ask you to say a little bit about how you came to the decision.

Alnoor | When people ask me, “what’s the most important thing I can do,” I often say to people, especially in the spiritual community: to understand how neoliberalism works. We must understand how capitalism works because it is the very oxygen in which we are breathing. It has intermediated every aspect of our lives.

If we look at what the logical outcome of capitalism would be, we would all be wearing Nike shoes and having Apple computers and using Microsoft Office and listening to Beyonce or whatever the corporate music world wants us to listen to. And there’s a *flywheel effect*. It feeds itself. So, the more power certain corporations have, the more they can buy the political process, through money in politics. The more they can exploit labor and environmental laws to find the cheapest labor wherever they are in the world. The cycle just speeds itself up.

The antidote to monoculture is polyculture: many ways of being, many ways of knowing, many tongues. When we start to understand that, we start to see where there is a polycultural resistance. When you see the world in this critical way, the place to look is the popular resistances because that’s where the intelligence is.

Michael | There’s a wonderful quote from the science fiction writer William Gibson: “the future is already here—it’s just not very evenly distributed.” So we have these countries that are

clearly in complete collapse now, whole regions, almost all continents in collapse. And then we have other countries that are, or regions, that are degrading very rapidly. And you know, they're serious scientific debates right now about whether of the 9 billion people on earth, 1 billion will be alive in another 20 years. That's being seriously debated, I mean, honestly, seriously debated.

There are many questions that this raises. For one thing, it raises the deep psychological and spiritual questions about not only how do we live with this, but what do we tell our children? How do we speak the truth about what is happening? And, at the same time, create an environment where one can live with some hope and some peace of mind about what we're moving into without denying it away.

Alnoor | That's a beautiful question. I feel partly what's happening right now at a cultural level is that we're being initiated into nondualistic thought. To be able to hold not just two, but multiple perspectives simultaneously. In the Vedic tradition, they call this period that we're in the Kali Yuga, the dark ages. If you look at the scriptures that refer to the Kali Yuga, it's described as a point of bifurcation—it is the point with the strongest amount of darkness and psychosis and shadow, but it's also the period with most amount of light and the most amount of assistance from interdimensional beings and spirits and guides and ancestors and all of that.

It's being able to live and to be in relationship to multiple truths simultaneously. What that is going to require is a very deep unlearning and deprogramming of everything we think we know and everything we've been socialized into being. That includes the things we hold onto hardest like our religiosity, our belief in what the family unit should be, our belief in what gives us safety, etc., because it's actually these desires that are creating the system we live in. It's our desire for the comfort of continuing to live the way we live. You know the old line by George Bush about the American way of life is not up for question. Well, if you're negotiating with Mother Earth, I think it is, whether you like it or not.

Michael | So I heard you say something significant. Please correct me if I do not remember this. You said, this does not have to end in catastrophe. You said that the grief about climate and everything else is a necessary component, but we don't want to be stuck there. And there are parts of us that are dying. There are parts of us that are being born and that if we hold it that way, that this period of the Kali Yuga, which we think of only as the darkest age, we miss the equal power of the light, that all kinds of miracles that are possible and happening and that all kinds of forces, many of which we don't have any notion of, are there to come to our assistance. Yes? All right. So in your new community, what do you say to the children about what is happening? And in language a child can understand? Suppose that instead of us in the room, you had a group of 8- to 12-year-olds, and they were saying to you, "Alnoor, you have thought a lot about this. We see that over the past few days children have been marching all over the world for the climate crisis." What would you say to the children?

Alnoor | I like to start with first principles. When you access reality at the highest level of unity consciousness, there is only this one divinity expressing itself in all these forms. But that doesn't mean there's not agency, self-choice. That's nondual thought. It's why we can't spiritually bypass and say, well, there's only oneness. Well, there's only oneness *and* some people are more responsible than others for this crisis, and some people are benefiting more than others. And I think that's actually important to tell children. To not treat them as children or not to treat them as students, but to bring them into the initiation of nondual thought very early on. That's what the great mythologies always did.

There's that old Ram Dass line where he says, "the universe is perfect, including my desire to change it." These things are not happening outside of us. It's the nature of oneness, playing out the cosmic drama in multiple forms. So does that answer your question in a sort of abstract way?

Michael | Yes, but it raises another question. You are suggesting to the children that they understand themselves as both the separate entities, but also as the oneness. And you have this yantra on your arm that is the yantra of Kalki, who comes on his white horse with a light sword and chops off the heads of all the capitalists. So my personal question to you is, because this is a spiritual biography, do you experience the force of Kalki or some other transpersonal entity within yourself?

Alnoor | I think there's a time to pray to beings outside of yourself. It's not just all embodiment. So, do I pray to Kalki? Yes. And I also pray to Kali because I also think it's her time. I also pray to Allah, *i.e.*, to cosmic consciousness itself, and to the spirits and to the elements and to interdimensional beings and extradimensional beings for assistance right now.

Do I want to play the role of Kalki? No. I believe in nonviolence. Would I observe Kalki chopping off the heads of those who benefitted from the Kali Yuga, including myself? Yes. Would I take satisfaction in that? Well, I don't know what state of being I'd be in while I'm in observance of that.

Michael | How do you pray?

Alnoor | I'm a big believer in contextual truth. This is why the idea of a church or a mosque was always anathema to me. They were telling me how to pray and that makes no sense to a mystic because in the Sufi tradition, for example, we talk a lot about walking prayer. The point of prayer is to not create a sequestered part of your life while you are praying to something outside of you. It's to be in awareness that you are Allah becoming self-aware. You are consciousness becoming self-aware. That is the process. One way to access that process can be dance or music or tantra, and another way could be to pray for other beings.

This is a very strong part of the Sufi tradition. How do you walk into a room and pray for every being and their ancestors and their healing and their lineages and their karmic redemption, and also the wind and the moon and the stars and the ancestral forces in all the seen and unseen and visible and invisible things? That's the practice of Dhikr. That's the practice of being in the mantra and being in the devotion. And for me, a big part of this practice is political work.

The animate, living universe is showing you a context in which we have 10 years left to live this way. And there are consequences to the way we're living. It's not just that this is going to happen in 10 years, like it's out there as an external thing. Destruction is happening now. Two hundred species a day are going extinct right now. And what are we doing about that? The inner work is not enough. It's not to say we shouldn't do it, of course not. It's just that the meditation is the prerequisite for the revolution.

And there's also no way, no one way, to be a revolutionary in this time. How could there be? Some people will do it through the existing structure and some people will do it outside the existing structure. Some people will do it just through embodiment. You'll just be in their presence and you will understand that their vibration is of such a signature that that itself shifts you.

There is no right way to do this work. But what I would say is that the evolutionary work happens through the inquiry of the consequences of our action. And the most "awake" people I

know are so deeply sensitive to the consequences of their actions in every way, like the way they pray on their food. They understand that the entire globalized supply chain and fossil fuels and slave labor and carbon emissions from having food shipped around the world came on this plate and, nondualistically, they're simultaneously deeply appreciative of it, to the point of reverence. You can call that spirituality, or you can call that awareness of consequence.

Michael | Alnoor Ladha, thank you for being with us for the New School.

Alnoor | Thank you, Michael. Thank you for having me here. Thank you for your work in the world.

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This is an edited transcript of a conversation that took place on September 21, 2019, between Michael Lerner, executive director of Commonweal and Alnoor Ladha, the co-founder and executive director of The Rules, a global collective of activists focused on addressing the root causes of inequality, poverty, and climate change that existed from 2012 to 2019 inclusive. This is an edited version of the transcript. You can listen to the full interview here:

<https://soundcloud.com/tnscommonweal/20190921-alnoor-ladha-mystical-anarcism-a-spiritual-biography>

And a video version can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SiqzXSEKVIk>

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