

What is Pagan Anarchism?

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Prayer to Our Lady of Anarchy

Oh black-robed lady with the bleeding eyes,
Red-belted, standing on an open book,
With hands outstretched but empty. Hear our cries!
In dread and sorrow for the things you've seen
You weep for us. And yet your heart is fire.
Oh red and black Madonna, let desire
Come blazing through us till we cannot sleep.
Destroy our apathy
And help us keep
Our covenant with rage,
Our own bright fire.
And let our eyes bleed with the same desire
Until the day arrives when we shall see
Fulfillment of the prophecy
That someday soon, a flood
Shall cleanse these streets and wash your cheeks of blood.

In Spain before the Civil War, anarchism was known as “the Idea,” and anarchist activists had a reputation for almost monastic austerity and self-discipline. Despite these semi-religious overtones, the far majority of them were atheists and many were militantly hostile to organized religion. Today’s anarchist movement still includes many atheists, but also a large minority of religious people — including pagans. Pagan anarchism is a reality, a fact which would probably surprise many of the past adherents of “the Idea.” So what exactly is pagan anarchism?

Paganism and anarchism are both hard to define, because so many people attach so many different meanings to both words. To understand how these two ideas can work together, we first have to understand what they each mean separately.

“Paganism” in particular can mean a lot of different things. Many of the people who use the word now are referring to one particular type of pagan religion loosely based on Wicca. Many of them are not even aware that the terms “pagan” and “Wiccan” are not synonyms, or that there

are types of paganism with little similarity to Wicca. Scholars often use the word “pagan” to refer to the polytheistic religions of pre-Christian Europe, some of which were fully organized religions with State support. Modern reconstructionist pagans look to these ancient forms of polytheism for inspiration and try to systematically reconstruct these ancient practices.

I’m using the word in a broader sense, to refer to folk religious and magical practices focused on nature spirits, fairies, the dead and the gods. Paganism in this broader sense did not end with the Christian conversion, because it was never limited to “organized religion” in the first place. Regular people all over Europe continued to leave offerings for the fairies and the dead many centuries after the official conversion to Christianity. They didn’t think of themselves as “pagans” in any formal sense, but they still thought of the world around them as being filled with spirits and their daily spiritual practices reflected this worldview. They still believed in local fairy queens and fairy kings, entities that would have been understood as gods before the Christian conversion. They also retained a semi-polytheistic worldview in the veneration of saints, many of which were not recognized as saints officially by the church and a few of which were originally pre-Christian gods.

Peasants resisting feudalism sometimes turned to this tradition of magic and spirit worship for aid against their oppressors. For instance, Emma Wilby’s *The Visions of Isobel Gowdie* documents how folk beliefs about fairy kings and the malevolent dead were used by magic practitioners in 17th century Scotland to curse feudal landowners.

During the time of the enclosures, rebels in Ireland described themselves as followers of the fairy queen Sadhbh, angered by the enclosure of the commons. There are a number of similar accounts from other areas, showing that folk magical and religious practices were not merely “the opium of the people” but could be invoked to inspire struggles against oppression.

So when I talk about “paganism,” I’m not necessarily talking about Wicca and I’m not necessarily talking about a meticulous reconstruction of pre-Christian polytheism. I’m talking about the religious and magical practices of the common people — centered on fairy spirits, the dead and other entities such as saints or gods. These practices existed alongside organized religion yet distinct from it, before the Christian conversion and after it. People cultivated relationships with the spirits of nature, the dead and other entities for help with their practical daily problems — including how to effectively resist oppression. When you combine this type of religious practice with anarchism, you get pagan anarchism. So what is anarchism?

Most people interpret the word “anarchy” to mean “a society without a government,” but even though an anarchist society would not have a government as we now conceive of it, that isn’t really the origin of the word. The word comes from the Greek prefix *an* or “without” and *arkhos* or “ruler.” In other words, no bosses.

I’d like to suggest that this is a more useful way to understand the word, because it helps us clarify what anarchy is and what it isn’t.

When we think of the word “anarchy” as meaning “no bosses,” it’s clear that many of the ideas people refer to as types of anarchism really shouldn’t be described that way. If you want to live in a Mad Max world of warlords and warriors, you are not an anarchist. A fractured society of armed bands loyal to local warlords is not a society with no bosses — it’s a society with far too many of them! An anarchist society would have to reject the rule of petty local tyrants.

If you want to live in a world where anyone can do whatever they want at any time even if that means hurting or violating other people, you are not an anarchist. A society where bullies are allowed free reign is not a society with no bosses — it’s a society where any sociopath can

become your boss by simply overpowering you. An anarchist society would have to aggressively reject all forms of domination and mistreatment.

If you want to live in a world where business is totally unregulated because there is no government, you are not an anarchist. A society with a “free market” but no government is not a society with no bosses — it’s a society where your boss is all-powerful and there’s nothing you can do about it because your only options are to obey or starve. An anarchist society would have to reject the capitalist economic system.

So there are not as many different types of anarchism as there might seem to be. There are various political philosophies that are opposed to the State, but not necessarily to other types of domination and oppression — so-called national anarchism, anarcho-capitalism and so forth. None of these philosophies should logically be described as forms as anarchism, because none of them actually aim to get rid of bosses.

There are also varieties of anarchism that critique anarchist thought from one perspective or another, such as anarcho-feminism or queer anarchism. These movements don’t reject core anarchist values the way anarcho-capitalism does. Instead they call other anarchists to fully examine the implications of those values.

Finally, there is also a strong tradition of individualist anarchism. Personally I see this more as a difference of emphasis than a core disagreement. All anarchist philosophies aim to give individuals the greatest possible range of personal freedom.

However, not everyone values freedom highly enough to respect the freedom of others. When other people won’t respect your autonomy, you can stand up to them on your own if you’re strong enough — but there’s no way you can always be strong enough. The only way you can ever be secure in your autonomy is to actively protect the autonomy of others. Passively respecting their autonomy (as in Right Libertarianism) is not enough, because it still leaves them without your direct assistance against bullies and predators — and thus leaves you without theirs. If you want autonomy, you must have solidarity.

The only way for people to successfully resist the tyranny of would-be warlords, sociopathic predators and capitalist exploiters is to stand together, on the principle that “an injury to one is an injury to all.” That means that anarchism is logically a form of communism.

Some anarchists use the word anarcho-communism. This sounds like it must describe a particular sect within anarchism, but in my opinion it really just clarifies what the word “anarchism” logically implies.

If some people have more than they need while others struggle, then the people who have more than they need will obviously become the bosses.

If you want to create a society with no bosses, you have to get rid of economic inequality — and that means getting rid of private property and restoring the commons. Personal property such as your own living space would not be a problem for a society without bosses, but private property beyond what you can personally use would have to be a concept unrecognized by the society. If any person tried to claim ownership of more property than needed for personal use, other people would be free to simply disregard the claim.

A society with no bosses would still have to have a way to get things done. The only way you can get things done when no one has the power to tell everyone else what to do is to get together and talk it out. You can talk until you all agree on a course of action, in which case you have consensus. Or you can agree that you’ll talk for a while, take a vote and then abide voluntarily by the results of the vote. So, a society with no bosses would have to be directly democratic.

There's no way to run a directly democratic society on a massive scale, so a society without bosses would have to be decentralized. However, there's also no way for tiny communities like that to be completely independent, so they would have to work with other such communities in some sort of loose federation. An anarchist society would be a federation of directly democratic people's assemblies with no concept of private property. This is the society described by most of the major anarchist thinkers, although the details vary.

So much for theory. For whatever reason, anarchists have developed an unfortunate reputation for sectarian dogmatism. If you look up "anarchism" online, you will find many densely-argued debates about the tiniest points of anarchist doctrine. This is somewhat ridiculous — in a society with no bosses, how can there possibly be one perfect system?

I believe that anarchism should be broadly understood in the terms given here, but that any sort of pre-set anarchist dogma is a contradiction in terms. Any revolutionary project based on the principles of autonomy and solidarity is a step in the right direction, and quibbles about the exact system and whether it's "truly anarchist" are a waste of time. It doesn't even matter whether the people involved in the project call it "anarchism" or not. If it manifests general principles of moving away from rule by bosses and toward "power from below" then anarchists ought to give it their support.

In my opinion, we shouldn't think of anarchism as a doctrine or a system, but as a critique of all existing systems — including those created or supported by anarchists. Anarchism is an approach to political philosophy in which you take a critical stance toward all claims of authority, and advocate for decentralization, equality, autonomy and communal decision-making. It can never become a finished project; the revolution must be perpetual.

If anarchism was a system or dogma, it could never achieve its goals without converting the majority of people to its cause. This is extremely unlikely, but it is also unnecessary. In times of chaos and the fall of empires, there are two different ways people can potentially respond — by falling in behind warlords and petty gangsters, or by working together in a spirit of mutual aid and cooperation. History provides examples of both; it's never written in stone. As human beings, we get to choose which path we will take.

Because human beings have an instinctive capacity for mutual aid, it is simply not necessary to convert everyone to anarchism. In the right circumstances, people will embrace communal structures of mutual aid and decision-making whether they think of themselves as anarchists or not. For example, the far majority of the people involved in the Occupy movement would not have identified as anarchists, but Occupy still used an anarchist model of decision-making. The role of the anarchist is to critique authority and promote autonomy and solidarity, but not to try to lead anyone to anything.

Defining paganism and anarchism as I have done here, how do the two ideas work together? It all comes down to your experience of spirits. If you've never interacted with spirits and you perceive the world in purely mechanical terms, then you may see spirit practices as a form of superstition and an aid to various forms of oppression. If you interact with spirits and perceive the world as being filled with spirits, then you can form relationships with those spirits just as you can with human beings or animals. Pagan practices are simply ways of interacting with the spirits all around us, ways of being in relationship with them. This has political implications.

For instance, if the world is a dead and mechanical place then you can blow up a mountain to get the coal inside it without worrying about anything other than the practical implications. If the mountain is seen as a living thing, imbued with spirit, and a home to a number of other spirits,

then you can't just do that. You have to respect the autonomy of the spirit world along with the human world. You have to stand in solidarity to resist and defeat anyone trying to commit the crime of blowing up the mountain.

If a river is just a body of water, you can dump poison in it without worrying about anything other than whether you might need to drink that water later. It's a different matter entirely if you think of it as poisoning a goddess.

If the world as a whole is just a rock we happen to live on, we can use and exploit anything we find on that rock until there's nothing else to use up. Of course, we'd die then — but it's always easy to forget about tomorrow and think only about today. If the world as a whole is alive and filled with spirit, treating everything as an exploitable object starts to look like the greatest crime in all of history.

Although the majority of modern pagans are not anti-capitalists, there is a fundamental contradiction between the pagan and capitalist worldviews. The worldview of capitalism is sociopathic — it treats everything and everyone as an object to be used. The worldview of paganism is relational — not only does it not treat people or animals as mere objects, it doesn't look at anything else as a mere object either.

Earlier forms of anarchism were atheistic because organized religion was a force of oppression. People are going to go on having spiritual experiences anyway, so perhaps the answer is not to deny those experiences but to acknowledge and celebrate them. If organized religion is the opium of the people, magical religion can be our medicine — healing us and giving us the strength to fight for a better world.

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