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Anarchists and Religion

Thinking about Anarchism

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historical circumstances, it offers something that people want. It offers an explanation of all sorts of natural and personal disasters, by saying that they are “the will of god”. It offers hope in a world where misery, poverty, ignorance, frustration and alienation are endemic.

To break this stranglehold we need a strategy that unites our vision of a better world in the here and now with struggles that bring people into conflict with clerical power and show up religion as a prop for the status quo, that stands in the way of their needs and desires. In Ireland this means fighting against clerical control of schools, hospitals, etc. It also means fighting for separation of church and state.

Church and State

The question that often arises is “surely as Anarchists you are against the state as well?” The simple answer is that we are but we are also for fighting for improvements to people’s lives in the here and now. Breaking the stranglehold of the church would ease the way for divorce, reproductive rights including abortion, along with stopping church control of schools.

For us religion is a private matter. It should enjoy no special privileges, tax reliefs etc. We expect members to be involved in the struggle against the power and control exercised by the churches. Nonetheless members can hold religious beliefs provided they fully accept this aspect.

In short we fight religion by fighting its root causes. The Workers Solidarity Movement is fighting for an anarchist society where people will come to realise that they have no need for religion or other mystical ideas. We challenge religion in a practical way by showing where it obstructs social progress and by leading the challenge to it at every opportunity.

Contents

Church power in Ireland	5
Church and State	6

The popular stereotype of anarchists' relationship to religion is that we are all priest-killers and church-burners. This is, as is usually the case with mainstream representations of anarchism, almost completely false. It is useful in the wake of the clerical paedophile scandals and the general stranglehold that the church exerts on Irish society to give a truer explanation of our position.

Anarchists are materialists. We understand that there is a real and concrete basis for the way society is organised right now. Religion generally sees society as god given and inevitable. Almost all world religions claim that the poor will be rewarded in the afterlife for passively accepting their lot in this one.

Religion is by its nature authoritarian, whether to a greater or lesser extent. It is based on 'faith' and obedience. The reality we face is of churches that are involved in the repression of women, of gay people and all of those who seek to change the face of the traditional (nuclear) family. It is no coincidence that fundamentalists of all religions, from Ireland to Iran, seek to push back the progress made by women in the workplace and the sexual revolution.

Church power in Ireland

As anarchists we oppose this authoritarianism. We are fighting to break the power of the church in Ireland. This power is immense. As well as its direct wealth, they control over 3,000 out of the 3,500 primary schools in the 26 counties, despite the fact that all the staff wages and 90% of building costs are paid by the State. They also control 67% of secondary schools and own Maynooth College. They have a majority on the boards of about half the hospitals. This allows them to veto even legal operations such as sterilisations.

However it is not enough just to oppose the churches' power. As Anarchists we must offer a real practical alternative analysis of society. The stronghold that the church has is not simply a result of