

The Realization
and Suppression
of Religion

Ken Knabb (March 1977)

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The Realization and Suppression of Religion

Religion undoubtedly surpasses every other human activity in sheer quantity and variety of bullshit. If one considers in addition its role as accomplice of class domination throughout history, it is little wonder that it has brought upon itself the contempt and hatred of ever increasing numbers of people, in particular of revolutionaries.

The situationists recommenced the radical critique of religion, which had been abandoned by the Left, and extended it to its modern, secularized forms — the spectacle, sacrificial loyalty to leaders or ideology, etc. But their holding to a one-sided, undialectical position on religion has reflected and reinforced certain defects in the situationist movement. Developing out of the perspective that to be superseded, art must be both realized and suppressed, situationist theory failed to see that an analogous position was called for regarding religion.

Religion is the alienated expression of the qualitative, the “fantastic realization of man.” The revolutionary movement must oppose religion, but not in preferring to it a vulgar amoralism or philistine common sense. It must take its stand on the other side of religion. Not less than it but more.

When religion is treated by the situationists, it is usually brought in only in its most superficial, spectacular aspects, as a straw man to be contemptuously refuted by those incapable of refuting anything else. Exceptionally, they may vaguely accept a Boehme or a Brotherhood of the Free Spirit into their pantheon of “greats” because they are mentioned favorably by the SI. But never anything that would challenge them personally. Issues deserving examination and debate are ignored because they have been monopolized by religion or happen to be couched in partially religious terms. Some may sense the inadequacy of such a dismissal, but are not sure how else to operate on

such a taboo terrain and so they too say nothing or fall back on banalities. For people who want to “supersede all cultural acquisitions” and realize the “total man,” the situationists are often surprisingly ignorant of the most elementary features of religion.

It is not a matter of adding in a dose of religion to round out our perspective, to create a situationism “with a human face.” One does not humanize a tool, a critical method. (The notion of “humanizing Marxism” only reveals the ideological nature of the Marxism in question.) It is a matter of examining the blind spots and dogmatic rigidities that have developed out of a largely justifiable critical assault on religion. It is precisely when a theoretical position has been victorious that it becomes both possible and necessary to criticize it with more rigor. The rough formula that was provocative in an earlier context becomes a basis for new ideologies. A qualitative advance is often accompanied by an apparently paradoxical retardation.

It is not enough to explain religion by its social role or historical development. The content that is expressed in religious forms must be discovered. Because revolutionaries haven’t really come to terms with religion, it continually returns to haunt them. Because the critique of it has remained abstract, superficial, vulgar-materialist, religion continually engenders new forms of itself, even among those who were previously against it for all the correct “materialistic” reasons. The situationists can complacently observe that “all the Churches are decomposing” and not notice that we are also witnessing, precisely in the most industrially advanced countries, the proliferation of thousands of religions and neoreligions. Every new religious manifestation is a mark of the failure of radical theory to express the hidden, authentic meaning that is sought through those forms.

Religion includes many unlike and contradictory phenomena. Besides its purely apologetic aspects, it provides aesthetically appealing rituals; moral challenge; forms of contemplation that “recenter” one; organizing principles for one’s life; communion rarely found in the secular world; etc. In exploding this agglomeration, the bourgeois revolution did not destroy religion but it served to some extent to separate out its diverse aspects. Elements of religion that were

originally practical are thrown back on their own and required to be so once more or disappear.

The neoreligious trips and techniques are legion: modifications or combinations of traditional religions; therapies psychological and psycho-physical; self-help programs; contemplative techniques; psychedelics; activities taken up as “ways of life”; communitarian experiments... Having been demystified, rationalized, commodified, these practices are to a certain extent taken up on the basis of their use value rather than being imposed as part of a monopolizing institutionalized system. The uses involved are, to be sure, widely varied, often escapist or trivial; and many of the old superstitions and mystifications remain even without the social rationale that formerly reinforced them. But this popular experimentation is not only a reflection of social decomposition, it is a major positive factor in the present revolutionary movement, the widespread expression of people trying to take their lives in their own hands. Situationist theory has oscillated between the vision of totally alienated people bursting out one fine day with the release of all their repressed rage and creativity, and that of microsocieties of revolutionaries already living according to the most radical exigencies. It has failed sufficiently to deal with the more ambiguous experiments on the margins between recuperation and radicality where contradictions are expressed and worked out; leaving them to the recuperation which apparently confirms its position. It is not a question of being more tolerant with these experiences, but of examining and criticizing them more thoroughly rather than contemptuously dismissing them.

As we develop a more radical, more substantial critique of religion, we can envisage interventions on religious terrains analogous to those of the early SI on artistic and intellectual terrains; attacking, for example, a neoreligion for not going far enough on its own terms, for not being, so to speak, “religious” enough, and not only from the classical “materialist” perspectives.

It is often forgotten that revolutionary theory is not based on preference or principle but on the experience of the revolutionary movement. The basis of the critique of “sacrifice,” for example, is not

that one should be egoistic on principle — that it is a bad thing to be altruistic, etc. — but stems from observation of the tendency for sacrifice and sacrificial ideology to be important factors in the maintaining of hierarchy and exploitation. It is merely a happy historical accident that there is a tendency for present revolutionary activity to be interesting and enjoyable; that being a tool of political manipulation is not only unpleasant but also unstrategic. The situationists were right to point out and affirm the playful aspects of radical struggles and the radical aspects of playful, apparently meaningless actions (vandalism, etc.). But the coincidence of these and other observations has led many people to the appealing if not quite logical conclusion that revolutionary activity is by definition pleasurable; or even that pleasure is by definition revolutionary. The problem is rather how to confront those situations where immediate pleasure does not automatically coincide with revolutionary needs: seeking ways to bring the two sides together (affective détournement) but not dissimulating the contradictions when this is not possible.

The same situationists who point out the stupidity of that leftism that reduces workers' struggles to purely economic issues, in their turn reduce revolution to purely "egoistic" issues when they insist that people are — or at least should be — only struggling "for themselves," "for the pleasure of it," etc. Their exhortations to "refuse sacrifice" substitute for any analysis or lead to false analyses. To denounce Maoism, for example, merely for its being based on "sacrifice" does not speak to the healthy, generous communitarian sentiments whose recuperation is at the source of much of Maoism's appeal. What is counterrevolutionary about Maoism is not sacrifice in itself, but the type of sacrifice and the use to which it is put. People have not only been willing, when necessary, to endure poverty, prison and other pains for revolution, they have often even done so joyously, foregoing material comfort as being relatively secondary, finding deeper satisfaction in the knowledge of the effectiveness and beauty of their acts. There are victories that are not visible to everyone, moments when one can see that one has "already won" a battle even though things may superficially seem the same as before.

It is necessary to distinguish between a principled devotion to a cause, which may involve some sacrifice of one's narrower egoistic interests, and degradation before a cause that demands the sacrifice of one's "better self" — one's integrity, honesty, magnanimity.

In emphasizing exclusively the immediate enjoyments to be found in revolutionary activity — out of naïve enthusiasm or with the aim of political or sexual seduction — the situationists have set themselves up for the complaints of those people who reject it on that basis, being disappointed in their expectations of entertainment.

It is understandable why antisacrifice has been such an uncriticized pillar of situationist ideology. First, it provides an excellent defense against accounting to oneself or others: one can justify many failings by simply saying that one wasn't passionately moved to do this or that. Secondly, the person who is a revolutionary solely for his own pleasure would presumably be indifferent or even counterrevolutionary when that happened to be more convenient; hence he is compelled, in order to prevent this embarrassing corollary from being noted, to postulate that revolutionary activity is always automatically pleasurable.

The very success of the SI contributed toward the apparent justification of an anachronistic pose deriving from the historical accident of its origins (out of the French cultural avant-garde, etc.) and even perhaps from the personalities of some of its determinative members. The aggressive situationist tone reflects the recentering of revolution in the real single individual engaged in a project that leaves nothing outside of itself. In contrast with the militant, the situationist is naturally quick to react against manipulation. Though such an attitude is quite the contrary of elitist, it is easily capable of becoming so in relation to those who lack this autonomy or self-respect. Having experienced the excitement of taking his history into his own hands (or at least having identified with those who have), he arrives at an impatience and contempt for the prevailing sheepishness. It is but a step from this quite understandable feeling to the development of a neoaristocratic pose. This pose is not always a mark of the proverbial "hierarchical aspirations"; rather, frustrated by the difficulty of noticeably affecting the dominant society, the situationist seeks the compensation of at

least noticeably affecting the revolutionary milieu, of being recognized there as being right, as having accomplished good radical actions. His egoism becomes egotism. He begins to feel that he merits an unusual respect for being so unusually antihierarchical. He haughtily defends his “honor” or “dignity” when someone has the effrontery to criticize him, and he finds in the SI and its approved forebears a style that goes well with this new manner of viewing himself.

An intuitive dissatisfaction with this egotistic style is at the source of much of the discussions expressed somewhat misleadingly in terms of “femininity” and “masculinity.” There is nothing intrinsically “masculine,” for example, about writing; women are going to have to learn how to do it if they don’t want to remain impotent. What they don’t have to learn is the pointless neoaristocratic posturing that has characterized predominantly male situationist expression.

Some situationists have not had any particular natural inclination for this posturing. But it has been difficult to isolate and therefore avoid it, since accusations of “arrogance,” “elitism,” etc., are often mistakenly aimed at precisely the most trenchant aspects of situationist practice. It is hard not to feel superior upon having some pseudocritique addressed to you that you’ve heard and refuted a hundred times before. Moreover, a false modesty may be misleading. There are some things you can’t let pass. Although a revolutionary should not think that he (or his group) is essential to the movement and is therefore to be defended by any means, he must defend his actions insofar as he feels that they reflect important aspects of that movement. It is not a matter of secretly storing up modesty and other virtues that God will see and ultimately reward, but of participating in a global movement whose very essence is communication.

The situationist scene, providing a favorable field of play for vanity and in-group games, has attracted many people with very little to do with the revolutionary project; people who in other circumstances would have been fops, dandies, social intriguers, cultural dilettantes, hangers-on. It is true that the situationist movement has reacted against many of these elements with a vigor that was perhaps unexpected to them, and which has discouraged many others from thinking they could

disport themselves there with impunity. But this has often been not because of their pretentious role, but because they did not maintain that role credibly enough.

Conversely, the situationist scene has tended to repel other in many ways serious individuals who felt this pretentious egoism to be an anachronism far removed from any revolution they would have been interested in. Seeing this pretentiousness apparently linked with the situationists' trenchant radicality, many people facilely rejected both at once, choosing other pursuits which, while more limited, at least avoided this repugnant posturing. The movement that counted on the radical appeal of antirole, antisacrificial activity ended up repelling people who had no desire to sacrifice themselves to the reactionary situationist role.

The egoist situationist has a rather philistine conception of human liberation. His egoism is only the inversion of self-abasement. He advocates "play" in a juvenile sense, as if the mere breaking of restrictions were automatically productive of pleasure. In evoking the child, he is sympathizing not only with his rebelliousness but also with his impatience and irresponsibility. His criticism of "romantic love" stems not only from a perception of its illusions and neurotic possessiveness, but also from a simple ignorance of love and its possibilities. It isn't so much the alienated human community that bothers him as the things that prevent him from participating in it. What he really dreams of, behind the situationist verbiage, is a cybernetized spectacular society that would cater to his whims in more sophisticated and varied ways. He is still a consumer, and a very conspicuous one, in his frantic insistence on "pleasure without limit," the gratification of an "infinite multiplication of desires." If he dislikes "passivity" it is not so much that being forced into it restricts his creative impulses as that he is an addict of nervous activity and doesn't know what to do with himself if he is not surrounded with lots of distractions. Of contemplation as moment of activity, or of solitude as moment of dialogue, he knows nothing. For all his talk about "autonomy," he lacks the courage to act without caring what others will think of him. It is not his life that he takes seriously, but his ego.

Critical theory does not present a fixed, “objective” truth. It is an assault, a formulation abstracted, simplified and pushed to the extreme. The principle is, “If the shoe fits, wear it”: people are compelled to ask themselves to what extent the critique rings true and what they are going to do about it. Those who wish to evade the problem will complain about the critique as being unfairly one-sided, not presenting the whole picture. Conversely, the dialectically ignorant revolutionary who wishes to affirm his extremism will confirm the critique (as long as it’s not against him) as being an objective, balanced assessment.

Much revolutionary theoretical nonsense stems from the fact that in a milieu where “radicality” is the basis of prestige, one has an interest in making ever more extremist affirmations and in avoiding anything that might be taken to reflect a weakening of one’s intransigence toward the official bad things. Thus the situationists will look rather favorably on playful or erotic aspirations (“it’s only necessary that they follow out their most radical implications,” etc.) while dismissing moral aspirations with insults, although the ones are no more ambiguous than the others.

In exaggerated reaction against the general complicity of morality with the ruling society, situationists frequently identify with their enemies’ image of them and flaunt their own “immorality” or “criminality.” Such an identification is not only infantile, it is virtually meaningless these days when an irresponsible libertinism is one of the most widely accepted and extolled ways of life (though the reality usually lags far behind the image). It was the bourgeoisie that was denounced in the *Communist Manifesto* for having “left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest.” If we are to use the works of a Sade — that very picture of human alienation — or a Machiavelli, it is not as guidebooks for conducting our relations, but as unusually candid self-expressions of bourgeois society.

The egoist, antimoralist ideology has undoubtedly contributed to the quantity of bad faith and pointlessly acrimonious breaks in the situationist milieu. To be sure, situationists are often quite nice people; but this is virtually in spite of their whole ideological environment. I’ve

seen situationists become embarrassed and practically apologize for having done some kind act. (“It was no sacrifice.”) Whatever spontaneous goodness they have lacks its theory. Basic ethical vocabulary is inverted, confused and forgotten.

The fact that one can scarcely use a word like “goodness” without sounding corny is a measure of the alienation of this society and its opposition. The notions of the “virtues” are too ambiguous to be used without having been criticized and precised, but so are their opposites. Ethical concepts must not be left to the enemy without a fight; they must be contested.

Much of what makes people dissatisfied with their lives is their own moral poverty. They are encouraged on every side to be mean, petty, vindictive, spiteful, cowardly, covetous, jealous, dishonest, stingy, etc. That this pressure from the system removes much of the blame for these vices does not make it any less unpleasant to be possessed by them. An important reason for the spread of religious movements has been that they speak to this moral inquietude, inspiring people to a certain ethical practice that provides them with the peace of a good conscience, the satisfaction of saying what they believe and acting on it (that unity of thought and practice for which they are termed “fanatics”).

The revolutionary movement, too, should be able to speak to this moral inquietude, not in offering a comfortingly fixed set of rules for behavior, but in showing that the revolutionary project is the present focus of meaning, the terrain of the most coherent expression of compassion; a terrain where individuals must have the courage to make the best choices they can and follow them through, without repressing their bad consequences but avoiding useless guilt.

The compassionate act is not in itself revolutionary, but it is a momentary supersession of commodified social relations. It is not the goal but it is of the same nature as the goal. It must avow its own limitedness. When it becomes satisfied with itself, it has lost its compassion.

What is the point of lyrical evocations of eventual revenge on

bureaucrats, capitalists, cops, priests, sociologists, etc.? They serve to compensate for the lack of substance of a text and usually don't even seriously reflect the sentiments of the author. It is an old banality of strategy that if the enemy knows that he will inevitably be killed anyway, he will fight to the end rather than surrender. It is not of course a question of being nonviolent, any more than violent, on principle. Those who violently defend this system bring violence on themselves. Actually it is remarkable how magnanimous proletarian revolutions usually are. Vengeance is usually limited to a few spontaneous attacks against torturers, police or members of the hierarchy who have been notoriously responsible for cruel acts, and quickly subsides. It is necessary to distinguish between defense of popular "excesses" and advocacy of them as essential tactics. The revolutionary movement has no interest in vengeance; nor in interfering with it.

It is well known that Taoism and Zen have inspired many aspects of oriental martial arts: supersession of ego consciousness, so as to avoid anxiety that would interfere with lucid action; nonresistance, so as to turn the opponent's force against him rather than confront it directly; relaxed concentration, so as not to waste energy but to bring all one's force into sharp focus at the moment of impact. It is likely that religious experience can be drawn on in analogous fashion to enrich tactically that ultimate martial art which is modern revolutionary theoretico-practice. However, proletarian revolution has little in common with classical war, being less a matter of two similar forces directly confronting each other than of one overwhelming majority moving to become conscious of what it could be any time it realized it. In the more advanced countries the success of a movement has generally depended more on its radicality, and therefore its contagiousness, than on the number of weapons it could commandeer. (If the movement is widespread enough, the army will come over, etc.; if it isn't, weapons alone will not suffice, unless it be to bring about a minority coup d'état.)

It is necessary to reexamine the experiences of nonviolent religious or humanistic radical movements. Their defects are numerous and

evident: Their abstract affirmation of “humanity” is an affirmation of alienated humanity. Their abstract faith in man’s good will leads to reliance on moral influencing of rulers and on promotion of mutual “understanding” rather than radical comprehension. Their appeal to transcendent moral laws reinforces the ability of the system to do the same. Their victories gained by wielding the economy as a weapon are at the same time victories for the economy. Their nonviolent struggles still rely on the threat of force, they only avoid being the direct agents of it, shifting its use to “public opinion” and thus usually in the final analysis to the state. Their exemplary acts often become merely symbolic gestures allowing all sides to go on as before, but with tensions relaxed, consciences eased by having “spoken out,” “been true to one’s principles.” Identifying with Gandhi or Martin Luther King, the spectator has a rationalization for despising others who attack alienation less magnanimously; and for doing nothing himself because, well-intentioned people being found on both sides, the situation is too “complex.” These and other defects have been exposed in theory and have exposed themselves in practice for a long time. It is no longer a question of tempering the rulers’ power hunger, cruelty or corruption with ethical admonishments, but of suppressing the system in which such “abuses” can exist.

Nevertheless, these movements have at times achieved remarkable successes. Beginning from a few exemplary interventions, they have spread like wildfire and profoundly discredited the dominant system and ideology. At their best they have used — and often originated — quite radical tactics, counting on the contagious spread of the truth, of the qualitative, as their fundamental weapon. Their practice of community puts other radical milieus to shame, and they have often been more explicit about their goals and the difficulties in attaining them than have more “advanced” movements.

The situationists have adopted a spectacular view of revolutionary history in fixating on its most visible, direct, “advanced” moments. Often these moments owed much of their momentum to the long preparatory influence of quieter, subtler currents. Often they were “advanced” merely because accidental external circumstances forced

them into radical forms and acts. Often they failed because they did not know very well what they were doing or what they wanted.

Revolutionary as well as religious movements have always tended to give rise to a moral division of labor. Unrealistic, quasi-terroristic demands intimidate the masses to the point that they adore rather than emulate the propagators and gladly leave full participation to those with the qualities and dedication apparently necessary for it. The revolutionary must strive to demystify the apparent extraordinariness of whatever merits he may have, while guarding against feeling or seeming superior because of his conspicuous modesty. He must be not so much admirable as exemplary.

Ongoing radical criticism has been a key factor in the situationists' subversive power; but their egoism has prevented them from pushing this tactic to the limit. Surrounded by all the verbiage about "radical subjectivity" and "masters without slaves," the situationist does not learn to be self-critical. He concentrates exclusively on the errors of others, and his facility in this defensive method reinforces his "tranquil" role. Failing to welcome criticism of himself, he cripples his activity; and when some critique finally does penetrate because of its practical consequences, he may be so traumatized as to abandon revolutionary activity altogether, retaining of his experience only a grudge against his critics.

In contrast, the revolutionary who welcomes criticism has a greater tactical flexibility. Confronted with a critique of himself, he may "aggressively" seize on its weakest points, refuting it by demonstrating its contradictions and hidden assumptions; or he may take a "nonresisting" stance and seize on its strongest points as a point of departure, transforming the criticism by accepting it in a profounder context than it was intended. Even if the balance of "correctness" is overwhelmingly on his side, he may choose to concentrate on some rather subtle error of his own instead of harping on more obvious ones of others. He does not criticize the most criticizable, but the most essential. He uses himself as a means of approaching more general questions. Embarrassing himself, he embarrasses others. The more concretely and radically a mistake is exposed, the harder it is for others

to avoid similar confrontations with themselves. Even those who are at first gleeful at the apparent fall of an enemy into some sort of masochistic exhibitionism soon find their victory to be a hollow one. By sacrificing his image the revolutionary undercuts the images of others, whether the effect is to expose them or to shame them. His strategy differs from that of “subverting one’s enemies with love” not necessarily in having less love, but in having more coherence in its expression. He may be cruel with a role or ideology while loving the person caught in it. If people are brought to a profound, perhaps traumatic, confrontation with themselves, he cares little that they momentarily think that he is a nasty person who only does these things out of maliciousness. He wishes to provoke others into participation, even if only by drawing them into a public attack on him. We need to develop a new style, a style that keeps the trenchancy of the situationists but with a magnanimity and humility that leaves aside their uninteresting ego games. Pettiness is always counterrevolutionary. Begin with yourself, comrade, but don’t end there.

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Appendix

Kenneth Rexroth’s *Communalism: From Its Origins to the Twentieth Century* (Seabury, 1974) contains a pithy exposition of ways in which the dialectic of religion has continually given rise to tendencies that have been thorns in the side of dominant society and religious orthodoxy, particularly in the form here of millenarian movements and intentional communities. Although Rexroth’s anecdotal style often serves to concisely illustrate a point, much of his gossip about the foibles and delusions of the communalists, though amusing, obscures essential issues that he has not dealt with rigorously enough. He considers the communalist movements largely on their own terms — the nature of their communal life, the pitfalls they ran into, how long they endured. He is concerned more with whether the dominant society managed to destroy them than with whether they managed to make any dent in it. And indeed in many cases whatever subversive effect they had was only incidental. Many of the religious currents that exerted a more consciously radical force in social struggles, such as Gandhism or the Quakers in the antislavery movement, did not of course take a communalist form and so are not treated here.

In the period following the defeat of the first proletarian assault, when most intellectuals debased themselves into Stalinism, reaction, or intentional historical ignorance, Rexroth was one of the few to maintain a certain integrity and intelligence. He continued to denounce the system from a profound if not coherently revolutionary perspective. In the “left wing” of culture, he criticized many aspects of the separation of culture and daily life, but without following this out to the most radical conclusion of explicitly and coherently attacking the separation as such. Since the society represses creativity, he imagines the “creative act” as being the means of a subtle subversion by the qualitative; but he conceives this creative expression largely in artistic, cultural terms. (“I write poetry to seduce women and overthrow the capitalist system.”)

Rexroth has certainly had a determinative influence on a number of people — me, for one. But this influence, though healthy in many respects, has unfortunately not tended very much toward a lucid revolutionary theoretico-practice. He has failed to recognize many of the characteristics and expressions of the modern revolution, through lumping them too facilely with the failure of the old proletarian assault. Lacking a revolution, his social analyses range from perceptive insights to pathetic liberal complaining. He falls back on the notion of an “alternative society”: individuals quietly practicing authentic community in the interstices of the doomed society; on the theory that even if this offers little chance of averting thermonuclear or ecological apocalypse, it’s the most satisfying way to conduct your life while you’re waiting for it. The proliferation of such individuals holding to radically different values is a practical rejection of commodity ideology, a living critique of the spectacle effect. It is one of the possible bases of the modern revolution. But these individuals must grasp the historical mediations through which these values could be realized. Otherwise they tend to devolve into a vulgar complacency as to their superiority to those who don’t make such a break, and take pride in their irreconcilability to the system as they are integrated into it.

I highly recommend Rexroth’s essay on Martin Buber in *Bird in the Bush* (New Directions, 1959).

