I. Introduction

The relationship of Objectivism, libertarianism, and religion is a long and stormy one. Ayn Rand’s philosophy of Objectivism is all-encompassing, including not only political economy, but also metaphysics, epistemology, aesthetics, morality, logic, and much more. In contrast, libertarianism is a very narrow philosophy. It asks but one question, and gives but one answer. The question: under what circumstances is the use of violence justified? The answer: only in defense or retaliation against a prior use of invasive force. The implication is that religion is irrelevant to libertarianism, since it does not constitute a rights violation per se. Thus, this perspective takes no position on religion. One can be an atheist, an agnostic, or a theist, and act consistently with libertarianism. The obverse is of course true, also; one can be an atheist, an agnostic, or a theist, and act inconsistently with libertarianism. In contrast, since Objectivism is more all-encompassing than religion and, since it takes a definite view on religion, a very critical one, there is indeed an incompatibility between that viewpoint and religious practice.

In section II, we make the case that while Rand has contributed much of value to the libertarian movement, she has also led it astray with regard to religion. There is nothing incompatible between the libertarian movement and religious belief and practice, a view opposed by those libertarians in too great a thrall to Objectivism. Section III is devoted to a consideration of several objections to our thesis. We conclude in section IV.
II. Objectivism’s Baleful Influence on Libertarianism

It cannot be denied that Ayn Rand has had a long, strong and deep relationship with libertarianism. Although she dismissed libertarians as “hippies of the right,” many advocates of this position are still enthralled by her, inspired by her, and in debt to her for first introducing them to the moral case for free enterprise. I certainly include myself in this category.

One of the strongest influences she has had on the libertarian movement is her belligerent atheism. For many adherents of the freedom philosophy, an aggressive rejection of God and all things religious might as well be the basic axiom of their worldview. I confess that this too was roughly my own belief on the subject, for many years. What changed my mind? Why am I now just as much of an obdurate atheist as I have ever been, yet, also, a friend and supporter of religion? It has nothing to do with the fact that for 13 out of the last 17 years I have been employed by Jesuit, Catholic institutions. I was a professor at the College of the Holy Cross from 1991–1997, and have been at Loyola University New Orleans since 2001.

To some, those still enthralled by the Randian vision of religion and liberty, it is bad enough for a libertarian to take a positive view of religion. For most, it will appear as nothing less than a logical contradiction for an atheist such as myself to be an actual supporter and even admirer of religion. Let me explain.

I am guided in this by the aphorism “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” While the aphorism does not always hold true, in this case I think it does.

Which institution is the greatest enemy of human liberty? There can be only one answer: in general, the state, and, in particular, the totalitarian version thereof. Perhaps there is no greater example of such a government than the U.S.S.R., and its chief dictators, Lenin and Stalin (although primacy of place in terms of sheer numbers of innocents murdered might well belong to Mao’s China). We thus ask, which institutions did these two Russian worthies single out for opprobrium: Primarily, religion, and, secondarily, the family. It was no accident that the Soviets passed laws rewarding children for turning in their parents for anti-communistic activities. There is surely no better way to break up the family than this diabolical policy. And, how did they treat religion? To ask this is to answer it. Religion
was made into Public Enemy Number One, and its practitioners viciously hunted down.\textsuperscript{10}

Why pick on religion and the family? Because these are the two great competitors—against the state—for allegiance on the part of the people. The Communists were quite right, from their own evil perspective, to focus on these two institutions. All enemies of the overweening state, then, would do well to embrace religion and the family as their friends, whether they are themselves atheists, or parents.

The main reason religion sticks in the craw of secular leaders is that this institution defines moral authority independently of their power. Every other organization in society (with the possible exception of the family) sees the state as the source of ultimate ethical sanction. Despite the fact that some religious leaders have indeed bowed at the knee to government officials, there is a natural and basic enmity between the two sources of authority. The pope and other religious leaders may not have any regiments of soldiers, but they do have something lacking on the part of presidents and prime ministers, greatly to the regret of the latter: moral authority.\textsuperscript{11}

Such is my own position. I reject all religion, since, as an atheist (Hume 1854), I am unconvinced of the existence of God. I am no agnostic: I am convinced of His nonexistence. However, as a political animal, I warmly embrace religion as an institution. It is a bulwark against totalitarianism. He who wishes to oppose statist depredations cannot do so without the support of religion. Opposition to religion, even if based on intellectual grounds and not intended as a political statement, nevertheless amounts to de facto support of government.

But what of the fact that most if not all religions support the state? “Render unto Caesar . . . etc.” It makes no nevermind. Notwithstanding the fact that organized religion can often be found on the side of statism, these two dictators, Lenin and Stalin, not, paradoxically, the leaders of such religions, had it right: despite the fact that religious people often support the government, these two institutions, religion and the state, are, at bottom, enemies. I am “with” Lenin and Stalin on this point. From their own perspective, they were entirely correct in brutally suppressing religious practice. This makes it all the more important that the rest of us, atheists or
not, support those who worship God. The enemy of my enemy is my friend.

It will at this point be strenuously objected that numerous innocent people have been murdered in the name of religion. Alas, all too true. However, a little perspective comes not amiss at this juncture. Just how many people were killed by religious excesses, such as the Inquisition? Although estimates vary widely, the best estimates are that the number of deaths during this sad epoch, which took place over several centuries, was between 3,000 and 10,000; some experts place the number as low as 2,000.\textsuperscript{12}

Were it not murdered human beings that we are talking about, but considering solely the relative magnitudes, one might fairly say that this pales into utter insignificance compared to the devastation inflicted upon the human race by governments. According to the best estimates,\textsuperscript{13} the victims of statism in the 20th century alone approached the 200 million mark. That is no misprint! To compare a few thousands of unjustified deaths with several hundreds of millions is unreasonable. Yes, even the murder of one victim is an outrage. But in comparing religion and government one must keep in mind these astronomical differences.


Then, there is the school of Salamanca, populated, mainly, by priests such as the Dominicans (Francisco de Vitoria, 1485–1546; Domingo de Soto, 1494–1560; Juan de Medina, 1490–1546; Martin
de Azpilcueta [Navarrus], 1493–1586; Diego de Covarrubias y Leiva, 1512–1577; Tomás de Mercado, 1530–1576) and the Jesuits (Luis Molina [Molineus], 1535–1600; Cardinal Juan de Lugo, 1583–1660; Leonard de Leys [Lessius], 1554–1623; Juan de Mariana, 1536–1624). This school of thought is truly our intellectual and moral predecessor.\textsuperscript{14}

Objections\textsuperscript{15}

1. The Crusades

The Crusades were responsible for a “paltry” 9 million deaths.\textsuperscript{16} One must of course be cautious, very much so, when employing a word like “paltry” to such mass devastation. Let it be understood that such language is justified, only, \textit{in comparison} to the death toll that can be laid at the door of the state apparatus.

Consider the following chart (source: \texttt{<http://users.erols.com/mwhite28/warstat0.htm>}):

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Rank} & \textbf{Death Toll} & \textbf{Cause} & \textbf{Centuries} \\
\hline
1 & 55 million & Second World War & 20th \\
2 & 40 million & Mao Zedong (mostly famine) & 20th \\
3 & 40 million & Mongol Conquests & 13th \\
4 & 36 million & An Lushan Revolt & 8th \\
5 & 25 million & Fall of the Ming Dynasty & 17th \\
6 & 20 million & Taiping Rebellion & 19th \\
7 & 20 million & Annihilation of the American Indians & 15th–19th \\
8 & 20 million & Iosif Stalin & 20th \\
9 & 19 million & Midcast Slave Trade & 7th–19th \\
10 & 18 million & Atlantic Slave Trade & 15th–19th \\
11 & 17 million & Timur Lenk & 14th–15th \\
12 & 17 million & British India (mostly famine) & 19th \\
13 & 15 million & First World War & 20th \\
14 & 9 million & Russian Civil War & 20th \\
15 & 8 million & Fall of Rome & 3rd–5th \\
16 & 8 million & Congo Free State & 19th–20th \\
17 & 7 million & Thirty Years War & 17th \\
18 & 5 million & Russia’s Time of Troubles & 16th–17th \\
19 & 4 million & Napoleonic Wars & 19th \\
20 & 3 million & Chinese Civil War & 20th \\
21 & 3 million & French Wars of Religion & 16th \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}
Then, there is the question of whether the Crusades can be characterized as caused by religion rather than by government. Obviously, there was a religious component in these wars, a strong one. But these deaths are not entirely attributable to religion; there was also a significant secular contribution.\textsuperscript{17} In any case, the Crusades, were it inserted into the table, would merely be tied for 14th place.

2. The Taiping Rebellion

Now consider the Taiping rebellion. Here, it cannot be denied that there was a strong religious component.\textsuperscript{18} But, again, a bit of perspective is required to do justice to these figures. First, it places only sixth on the list. Second, apart from the undoubted religious aspect of this conflagration, it also had a significant secular aspect. The rebellion, after all, was against a government.

The chief rebel Hung Hsiu-ch'üan fashioned himself as the younger brother of Jesus Christ, under the tutelage of Issachar J. Roberts, a Southern Baptist minister, and started a movement called the “God Worshipers.” “The movement, however, did not (begin) open revolt until the government started to harass the God Worshipers systematically.”\textsuperscript{19} So it is not clear that this horrific episode is properly laid at the door of religion in anything like its entirety.\textsuperscript{20}

And, yes, one or two of the others on this list might reasonably be interpreted as religiously oriented, at least in part. The French Wars of Religion, for example, certainly qualify. But note that they barely made the cut, in taking last place in this compilation. A similar analysis applies to the Thirty Years War. It too had origins in religion, to be sure, but not solely. In any case, it occupies only 17th position in the chart.

3. The Taliban

Groups such as the Taliban seek both governmental and religious power. They issue fatwas against innocent artists and writers.\textsuperscript{21} The Koran is filled with messages of hate. In some of these organizations, there is a death threat against anyone who departs, and takes up a different religion.

However, in theocracies of this sort that occupy the Muslim and Arab world, it is difficult to separate the state from the purely
religious. My claim is that the former is more problematic than the latter, not that the latter is totally innocent of all wrong doing. Thus, even were such groups guilty of mass murder, it is not clear that all of it should be attributed to religion.

However, it is unclear that anything like mass murder has been perpetrated by followers of these organizations. It is not the Arabs who have some 730 military bases located in 130 foreign nations. It is, rather, the United States that is guilty of such war-mongering threats (Paul 2008).

Moreover, while it cannot be denied that the Koran contains passages that are warlike, the same is true of the Old Testament. It is surely unsavory to threaten death to religious apostates, but we are talking mass murder here, not the unjustified killings of, perhaps, hundreds of people, no matter how unjustified those are.

4. Logical Inconsistency: Spirit and Religion

I have stated elsewhere:

Another reason why I oppose libertinism is more personal. I have come to believe that each of us has a soul, or inner nature, or animating spirit, or personhood, or purity, or self respect, or decency, call it what you will. It is my opinion that some acts—the very ones under discussion, as it happens—deprecate this inner entity. They are a way of committing mental and spiritual destruction. And the practical result of these acts, for those able to feel such things, is emptiness and anomie. They may ultimately lead to physical suicide. And this destruction of individual character has grave repercussions for all of society. (Block 1994, 124)

How can this be reconciled with my statement, supra: “Why am I now just as much of an obdurate atheist as I have ever been, yet, also, a friend and supporter of religion?”

My answer is that I see no logical inconsistency between disbelief in God and belief in man’s spirit. Surely, it is a basic aspect of Austrian economics (Hoppe 1995) that man has purposes, motives, goals, that we are not merely automata; surely, one need not be a theist to believe this? If we have “an animating spirit,” then we are
more than flesh and bones, autonomic pieces of meat. Atheists, I contend, may entertain such a belief without self contradiction.

5. Logical Inconsistency: Capitalizations

“It troubles me to find a person who states that he considers himself ‘an obdurate atheist,’ and who also states, ‘I am convinced of His nonexistence,’ while in his writings he capitalizes the word ‘His,’ while not capitalizing the word ‘atheist,’ and claims to be, and is believed by many to be a true Atheist. It may be true that you are what you say you are, but if that is true, it seems obvious that you wish, and long to be a believer so much, that you seek out misleading statistics to defend the organized religious institutions.”

“God” is typically capitalized, as is “Supreme Being,” or, “His,” when referring to the preceding. “Atheist,” in contrast, is typically not capitalized. I am only following traditional punctuation, in such word usage, not acknowledging that religious belief should be elevated over atheism. In my view, if there is any ranking to be made, it lies in the very opposite order.

6. Comparing Unequals

“. . . if you compare the deaths of one period to that of another, you must also compare the world population of each period.”

True. Absolute numbers of deaths must, strictly speaking, give way to deaths on a per capita basis. And, yes, population is rising over time. However, when the numbers of religious and secular deaths are so divergent, in “favor” of the latter, one may perhaps be excused for not converting all statistics to a per capita basis.

7. Religion and the State are Intimate Bedfellows

Certainly, for much of history, the state and religion were working in tandem, for evil purposes. Even nowadays there are religious groups that support governmental invasions. However, I see the state as evil per se (since it necessarily violates rights), but religion is not evil per se; it is evil, only, when it violates rights (for example, the Inquisition). Nor can I see my way clear to condemning religion for failing to oppose state evil. For to do so would involve us in the claim that there are positive, non-contractual, obligations, and these do not exist, at least under the libertarian legal code.
8. False Arguments Undermine Libertarianism; Religion is False

Here is an objection voiced by a referee of this journal:

One of (this author’s) arguments is that libertarianism per se does not imply the falsity of religion. This argument by itself seems weak; a widespread belief could have a tendency to undermine libertarianism even if it were formally consistent with it. For example, imagine a society in which it is widely believed that a free market leads to massive poverty and starvation, while a government-regulated market will lead to universal prosperity. There is no explicit contradiction between those purely descriptive beliefs and the normative thesis of libertarianism; after all, a libertarian could believe that liberty would cause mass starvation and still favor liberty (either because they like mass starvation, or because they think rights take precedence over utilitarian considerations).

Still, it seems unlikely that a society in which those economic beliefs were widespread would sustain a reliable commitment to liberty. Hence libertarians qua libertarians have reason to offer (and do offer) utilitarian arguments for liberty in addition to rights-based ones, even if their own reasons for being libertarians are purely rights-based. Since the belief that free markets cause mass starvation counts as an enemy of liberty even though it is not inconsistent with libertarianism as a moral doctrine, it follows that one cannot appeal to mere consistency with libertarianism to establish that a doctrine is no enemy of liberty.

I agree with this referee; mere logical compatibility with libertarianism is no guarantee of support for it. The belief that $2+2=4$ is certainly compatible with libertarianism, but it is hardly the case that everyone who subscribe to the one will uphold the other. A person who denied the truth of this mathematical equation would certainly qualify as irrational. But he could still be a libertarian, provided he supported the nonaggression axiom and private property rights. However, I am hardly limiting myself to the claim that religion’s mere
consistency with libertarianism renders it a friend to our philosophy. Some religious persons are active supporters. For example, the numerous friends of liberty I mention above. What about the school of Salamanca? The Acton Institute, headed by Fr. Robert Sirico, does marvelous work in convincing the clergy of the merits of free enterprise. A widespread belief (logically) could have a tendency to undermine libertarianism, but religion does not. It cannot be denied that some religious folk are socialists/fascists, but the same could be said for some atheists. No, religion is orthogonal to libertarianism, not the necessary enemy of it as Rand holds.

What has Rand to say of this? In her view:

What is mysticism? Mysticism is the acceptance of allegations without evidence or proof, either apart from or against the evidence of one’s senses and one’s reason. Mysticism is the claim to some non-sensory, non-rational, non-definable, non-identifiable means of knowledge, such as “instinct,” “intuition,” “revelation,” or any form of “just knowing.” (1984, 62)

And Rand (1963, 18) states that “the damnation of life and the worship of death, with the promise of rewards beyond the grave—these are the necessary tenets of the [mystic’s] view of existence.”

Yes, yes, it cannot be denied that the lot of the mystic is an irrational one. But we are here not concerned with what is rational and what is irrational. Instead, our goal is to (rationally) shed light on what, precisely, is libertarianism. And there is no doubt that religious people may be libertarians in perfectly good standing.

IV. Conclusion

It is long past time that the Austro-libertarian movement reject the virulent Randian opposition to religion. Yes, Ayn Rand has made contributions to our efforts. We must not throw out the baby with the bathwater. But surely antireligious sentiment belongs in the latter category, not the former.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to thank William Barnett II, Guido Hülsmann, and
Vedran Vuk for helpful suggestions regarding an earlier draft of this essay. All errors, omissions and other infelicities are his own responsibility, of course. He also acknowledges the aid of Bill Walker, Jeff Justis, and Luis J. Orozco, II.

Notes


4. According to Parille 2003: “Ayn Rand’s philosophy is stridently anti-religious. It may well be the case that few philosophers have been so consistently anti-religious...”

5. In some ways, the Randian influence on libertarians was very salutary: it made the case that economic freedom was a moral as well as a utilitarian value. In this sense it combated another baleful influence on libertarianism, emanating from the Chicago School of economics. (For a critique of the latter from a libertarian point of view see Berliner 1995, 326; Block 1999; 2002; 2003a; 2006; unpublished; Friedman and Block 2006; Long 2006; Marcus 2007; Rothbard 2002; Vance 1996; 2005; Hoppe 2002; DiLorenzo 2002; North 2002; and Stromberg 2002. In 1946, Rand (quoted in Skousen 2001, 387) said of Friedman and Stigler (1946): “collectivist propaganda’ and ‘the most pernicious thing ever issued by an avowedly conservative organization.” However, the Randian atheistic influence on libertarianism was deleterious. To some ignorant libertarians, atheism is almost a necessary part of this philosophy.

6. States Szasz (2002): “Faulting me for being an atheist, Rothbard added: ‘Furthermore, in a fashion rather reminiscent of Ayn Rand, Dr. Szasz is almost fanatically anti-religion, and especially anti-Christian. Religion, and especially Christianity, are held to be responsible for a large part of the world’s neuroses, for fostering ‘childish dependency,’ as well as for encouraging behavior not proper to man’s life: e.g., humility, meekness, naiveté, etc., all of which add up, in Szasz’ view to ‘incompetence.’ Ministers and priests parasitically exploit their supporters, keeping them in this dependence, etc.”


10. See Anderson 1995; Timasheff 1942; Ramet 1993.

11. The pen is indeed mightier than the sword, since the former determines in what direction the latter is pointed. On this, see Hummel (2001, 527–28), who states:
“A final factor affecting warfare is, as we have seen, the motivation of the people themselves. Ideas ultimately determine in which direction they wield their weapons or whether they wield them at all.”

15. These objections were made to an earlier version of this paper (Block 2008).
17. It is beyond the scope of the present paper to attempt to distribute the blame for the loss of life during the Crusades between secular and religious sources. In that epoch, moreover, the distinction between the two was not as sharp as it is in the modern era, at least in the West.
20. According to Peikoff (1986): “What about Communism? Isn’t it a logical, scientific, atheistic philosophy, and yet doesn’t it lead straight to totalitarianism?” The short answer to this is: Communism is not an expression of logic or science, but the exact opposite. Despite all its anti-religious posturings, Communism is nothing but a modern derivative of religion: it agrees with the essence of religion on every key issue, then merely gives that essence a new outward veneer or cover-up.” But this is a confusion between the secular and the religious. Religion implies a belief in a superhuman Being; Communism, in sharp contrast, is not at all a “derivative” of religion. It was avowedly atheistic. We must make an exception for those forms of Buddhism that don’t recognize a superhuman Being. They, too, are religious. I owe this point to Roderick Long.
21. Salman Rushdie is only the highest profile victim.
22. It would be unexpected to find that religion was never guilty of anything untoward, given that this institution has been in operation for millennia.

References


___. Unpublished. Is Milton Friedman a libertarian?


The Great Terror. Edmonton, Alberta: Edmonton University Press.


