

### Kropotkin, Peter (1842–1921)

The Russian prince Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin was one of the leading geographers of his time and a central figure in the history of anarchist thought. His ideas have had an enduring influence on decentralism, regionalism, and alternative technology, and later thinkers such as Patrick Geddes, Lewis Mumford and Paul Goodman have looked to him for inspiration. More recently, he has been recognized for his influence on the radical environmental movement and more specifically as the most important theoretical forefather of green anarchism. Kropotkin's most famous concept is the idea that evolutionary advances throughout the natural world are promoted best through mutual aid, cooperation, and symbiosis. His social theory, including his view of religion and other institutions, is grounded in this view of nature.

Kropotkin sought to refute the Social Darwinist idea that social inequalities are the result of a competitive "struggle for survival" that is inescapable because it is rooted in nature. He observed that animals have social instincts with evolutionary value, and that symbiotic activity is more useful for survival than competitive and antagonistic behavior. Similarly, he saw the "struggle for survival" in human society as being primarily a cooperative social project of adapting successfully to the challenges of the environment. Mutual aid is thus a "factor of evolution" both in nature and in human society. In effect, the social instincts of animal communities are raised to the level of rational action and moral choice in humanity. Ethics therefore has a naturalistic basis, for ideas of good and evil relate ultimately to that which either contributes to or threatens the survival and well-being of the community.

For evidence of the efficacy of social cooperation, Kropotkin cites the practices of tribal societies, free cities and cooperative communities over the ages. This history inspires his anarchism, which has as its goal a system of social cooperation free from the state, capitalism, and other forms of hierarchical, concentrated power. He envisions a future cooperative society rooted in a scientific understanding of nature and society that understands mutual aid between human beings as a continuation of the larger tendencies of natural evolution. He recognizes the destructive instincts of humanity as being every bit as natural as the cooperative ones, but he considers them to be anti-evolutionary forces whose effects should be minimized through benign environmental influences.

Kropotkin applies these ideas concerning evolution, science and ethics in his analysis of religion. He sees religion as having two opposed dimensions. On the one hand, it has expressed the human tendency toward mutual aid and solidarity, thus furthering social evolution. He sees the religious precept of doing to others as one would have them do to oneself as only the developed form of the ethics that pervades nature. In his view, both Buddhism and Christianity differed from all previous religions by replacing cruel and vengeful gods with "an ideal man-god" who taught a religion of love. He credited Shakyamuni Buddha with introducing such concepts as universal compassion and kindness, love for one's enemies, sympathy for all living beings, contempt for wealth, and the equality of all human beings. He saw Christianity as a very similar but "higher" teaching than Buddhism, noting that Jesus (unlike Buddha, who was a Prince) came from among the ordinary people, and early Christianity showed a strong identification with the oppressed. He also argued that although Buddhism and Christianity were a break with previous religions, they were merely universalizing principles that were practiced within tribal religion, which applied principles of love, equity, and disinterested generosity within the bounds of the tribe, and which had their natural basis in the evolutionary value of mutual aid.

Kropotkin saw the other, anti-evolutionary dimension of religion in its role providing powerful (albeit declining) support for the system of domination, particularly in the case of Christianity. He contends that Jesus' original message of universal love and social equality was de-emphasized and thereby undermined by his later followers and scriptural interpreters and eventually destroyed with the establishment of a hierarchical Church (thus paralleling similar developments in Buddhism). Thus, Christianity was originally a revolt against the Roman Empire, but the Empire triumphed. Despite the egalitarian and communist tendencies of early Christianity, the Church became the avowed enemy of all such tendencies. In Kropotkin's view, Roman law and the hierarchical Church were the two forces that undermined the spirit of the freedom and instilled authoritarianism in European culture.

At the same time, according to Kropotkin, Christianity profoundly shaped the European view of nature. In his view, the religions of Egypt, Persia and India (except Buddhism) saw nature as a conflict between good and evil. He contended that this dualistic "Eastern" idea influenced Christianity and contributed to the belief in a moral battle between good and evil within the person and in society. Such beliefs, he says, reinforced tendencies toward repression and persecution. Moreover, the Church condemned the scientific study of nature and supported revelation, as opposed to nature, as the sole source of moral guidance. Kropotkin conceded that within Christianity the importance of human social instincts and human reason in the discovery of moral truth were recognized in Thomas Aquinas' philosophy, in Renaissance religious thought, and in other tendencies. However, he contended that on the whole the Church continued to stress the evil, fallen quality of both nature and human nature, and the need to look to God and revelation for salvation from them.

For Kropotkin, religion plays either a positive evolutionary role, to the extent that it continues tendencies in nature toward mutual aid and solidarity, or an anti-evolutionary one, to the extent that it allies itself with systems of domination. Furthermore, he saw a strong connection between the social functions of religions and their conceptions of nature. Religions that emphasize universal love and social equality generally have a positive view of the natural world, whereas religions that are allied with social hierarchy and domination propagate highly negative views of nature and justifications for dominating it.

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