Religion and digital culture:

**Religion for commoners**

posted by Nathan Schneider

One of the essential early texts of the open source software movement was “The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” a 1999 essay by programmer Eric S. Raymond in which he juxtaposes two approaches to developing computer programs, each with an analogy to a fixture of the medieval city: from the top down, like a cathedral, and from the bottom up, like a street market. At the time, open source software development was still largely characterized by a command-and-control (top down) process; Raymond advocated a more bottom-up method. He understood the bazaar (contra Clifford Geertz) as representing a way of harnessing collective intelligence toward collective ends: share the code with the world, and the world will fix its bugs in no time. Partly as a result of Raymond’s essay, the code underlying Netscape went open source, and the community-maintained Firefox browser was born. Much of the Internet—from Linux servers to Android phones—now runs on bazaar-style software.

Raymond’s choice of the big, bad cathedral as a foil to the people’s bazaar probably betrays the anti-religious, free-market biases of his but Raymond has more to offer religion than a slight: in its practical sociology of open source production, his essay offers a way out of the technological analogies that have tended to inform the study of religion.

Tech culture has often drawn upon religious analogies to understand its own priesthood, its cults, its evangelist theorized by means of technological imagery, from the forge and the crucible and the spandrel to the social net economic language, like Raymond’s market, and for good reason—religion and tech each have much to do with industrial factory workers in mind, saw religion as a grand delusion orchestrating mass exploitation. Max Web bureaucracies, attributed the capitalist frenzy to a Protestant ethic. A religion reporter at a major American nev he needs to do his job while covering the underground economy of the mob.

The economic analogies we choose have serious consequences for how we think about religion. Marx’s dialectic collective, and is illusory from the get-go. Weber’s religion of the office turns soteriology into a management pf

The most ambitious economic theory of religion in recent decades has been the rational-choice scheme that Rodney Stark and William developed, beginning in the late 1970s. The past, present, and future of religion, they argued, are explainable by neoclassical economics—we’re all trying to sop up whatever spiritual benefits we can get for the lowest possible Christianity as a case in point; Bainbridge, meanwhile, ported their theory’s machine-readable propositions int behaviors, and even experimented with personality-preservation software, reasoning that if the utility of an afterlife piety, religion would no longer corner that particular market and more people could feel free to find other uses

The afrofuturist jazz musician Sun Ra alluded to such an apotheosis of machine logic—the gizmos of the preser poem “confusion and chaos”:

> it's all of history happening
> it saw the Christians
To stave off the allure of such totalizing explanations, it is helpful to have a variety of useful, and admittedly partial, analogies on hand to explain everything, especially where cultural systems are concerned. If there’s one thing most good students of religion tend to share, it is an unbounded enthusiasm for the sake of promiscuity, what other kinds of analogies can we turn to?

Raymond’s “The Cathedral and the Bazaar” gestures toward a logic that has gone mostly unused as a lens through which to look upon the commons—the economy of people co-managing commonly held resources. The open source-software paradigm the cathedral’s hierarchy nor the bazaar’s market forces; it’s more akin to the on-the-ground practices of commoning. Yet there has been no Stark or Bainbridge to port the commons into a framework for the study of religion.

Open source has spurred a revival of interest in the economics of the commons, which normally lie hidden in plain view. Online, many millions of people are using Creative Commons licenses, the Wikimedia Commons archive, and open culture permits talk about the commons as fairly vague, catch-all jargon—“the anything commons!”—but we are beginning to see it as a system, with rules and logics distinct from those of, say, capitalism or socialism. Elinor Ostrom, the first and only female Nobel laureate in economics, the latter part of her career elucidating its principles by studying examples like commonly held pasture lands as commons tend to rely on—establishing clear boundaries, for instance, and participatory governance, and more.

Peter Linebaugh has recovered neglected traces of the commons in documents like the Magna Carta, and applied their insights. David Bollier’s recent book, Think Like a Commoner, is the best introduction to the commons available today.

The commons is an economy for stewardship. It inclines less toward maximizing profits than toward ensuring that their use is sustainable. Commoning has often been overlooked because of how deeply its practices embed themselves in the local rituals that order economic life—without World Bank economists bothering to standardize them, these practices and beyond, commoning is coming back. People are craving more cooperative forms of doing business, shared regimes grow less forgiving), and commons-based strategies for addressing the climate crisis.

In my reporting I’ve seen these cravings firsthand, and I’ve seen them intersect tellingly with religion. I visited Europe who turned to ancient monasteries as a model for anchoring new kinds of commons-oriented cities. I went to Ecuador for a conference on the commons in the United States to date, held at a boutique retreat center where people were honed into tools for resisting the carbon economy in the Hudson Valley region. Even when students of religion are turning to religion.

When we begin to see the people we study not just as lumpens or utility-maximizers, but as commoners, we can governing shared resources. We can understand ancient concepts like gleaning and jubilee—two constraints on Bible—not as tangential exceptions but as essential values. We can also examine rules over access to texts, inter and wisdom. This, too, tends to involve commoning. Alongside approaches to religion that emphasize powerful forces, religion itself can be thought of as a commons. Especially in less-industrial societies, this approach may economic analogies do.

The commons, like any economy, can also inform the structures of our own labor. Scholars and journalists already other professions, but understanding the commons could help us build sharing more firmly into our business r collaborative, even while enforcing rules against plagiarism and avoiding other tragedies of the intellectual commons. Begun posting portions of my research notes online.) Open access scholarly journals and magazines with Creative Commons licenses are prevalent, but their rise hasn’t always come with the business models needed to sustain them. The commons is
to support producers, not subvert them. That’s why Creative Commons and peer-production licenses make such content and when. How we share matters as much as that we share.

“The Cathedral and the Bazaar,” with its concern for the how, has become a canonical text for digital commone software developers—most famously “release early, release often” and “given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow” and certain attitudes toward one’s errors. It celebrates certain hierarchies of value and certain behaviors toward a practical and moral code. Even while writing off the cathedral, Raymond was nonetheless very much involved out to study.

Tags: commons, Creative Commons, digital culture, digital religion, digital technologies, open source, religion