



# The Immanent Frame

Secularism, religion, and the public sphere

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, but Raymond has more to offer religion than a slight: in its practical sociology of open source production, his e 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 Weber, bureaucracies, attributed the capitalist frenzy to a Protestant ethic. A religion reporter at a major American news outlet 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 philosophy.

The most ambitious economic theory of religion in recent decades has been the rational-choice scheme that Robert Putnam 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 price. [Christianity](#) as a case in point; Bainbridge, meanwhile, ported their theory’s machine-readable propositions into [behaviors](#), and even experimented with [personality-preservation software](#), reasoning that if the utility of an afterlife, 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 present in a poem “[confusion and chaos](#)”:

it’s all of history happening  
it saw the Christians

being fed to the lions every day—  
the computer in the sky  
saw it all

To stave off the allure of such totalizing explanations, it is helpful to have a variety of useful, and admittedly partial, explain everything, especially where cultural systems are concerned. If there's one thing most good students of 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 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 commons. 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 the economy daily (whether we know it or not) by making use of Creative Commons licenses, the Wikimedia Commons culture permits talk about the commons as fairly vague, catch-all jargon—"the *anything* commons!"—but we have a system, with rules and logics distinct from those of, say, capitalism or socialism. Elinor Ostrom, the first and foremost of the latter part of her career elucidating its principles by studying examples like commonly held pasture lands that commonsers 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 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 their use is sustainable. Commoning has often been overlooked because of how deeply its practices embed their 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 will reimagine the country's economy around the commons while *taking cues* from indigenous spirituality and the *largest conference on the commons in the United States to date*, held at a boutique retreat center where we are being honed into tools for resisting the carbon economy in the Hudson Valley region. Even when students of religion and commonsers are turning to religion.

When we begin to see the people we study not just as *lumpens* or *utility-maximizers*, but as commonsers, we can govern shared resources. We can understand ancient concepts like gleaning and jubilee—two constraints on the Bible—not as tangential exceptions but as essential values. We can also examine rules over access to texts, interpretation, 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 in other professions, but understanding the commons could help us build sharing more firmly into our business models collaborative, even while enforcing rules against plagiarism and avoiding other tragedies of the intellectual commons (I've begun posting portions of my research notes *online*.) Open access scholarly journals and magazines with Creative Commons 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 commons 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.

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