

Bad Apple

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Obedience and



Nora Ziegler

The casual manner in which an array of anarchist slogans, banners, book titles, t-shirts, zines, and badges mock and deride my religious faith masks the fragility of secular anarchist ideology. I used to help run stalls and sometimes workshops with the London Catholic Worker at the London Anarchist Bookfair. As a Christian anarchist, just being who I am felt like an act of disobedience. I felt intimidated but, to be honest, also thrilled by the power of my subjectivity to cause such offence.

The way that a lot of anarchists can't make sense of religious anarchism, suggests that they can't think beyond obedience as obedience to the state. The slogan, 'No gods no masters,' equates state authority with divine authority, and political with spiritual obedience, thereby reinforcing the universality of the state instead of undermining it. Ironically, this kind of anarchism reinforces the idea that there is really nothing beyond the imperialist capitalist state.

Above: Sisters Against the Arms Trade blockade an MBDA missile factory photo: with permission

The anarchist emphasis on disobedience is important. It is important to cultivate our ability to refuse authority, to take direct action, and organise independently in our communities. However, if disobedience doesn't lead to the formation of new and different forms of authority, it leaves the old authority intact. A liberating disobedience also requires openness towards positive experimentations with spirituality, sexuality, femininity, cultural identity, and organising structures.

In isolation, these experiments are always in danger of being recaptured by conservative religious institutions, liberal identity politics, and top-down organising approaches. However, our religious, activist, gender, sexual and cultural identities often contradict and unsettle each other, and yet co-exist dynamically within our bodies and communities. This contradictory nature of our social identities and relationships resists being fully absorbed by institutional or ideological structures.

d Disobedience

The activist, Jessica Reznicek, (*Called to be Faithful and Rebellious*, p4.) says that her religious faith enabled her to do courageous direct actions and survive the state repression that followed. Her disobedience to energy corporations and the state is enabled by a spiritual obedience. It could be argued that this way of thinking subordinates disobedience to obedience. However, this is only the case if we think of obedience as a universal category that includes both spiritual and political obedience. While spiritual and political obedience may overlap and mutually impact each other, they don't fully translate.

If obedience is not universal, then neither is disobedience. To recognise this is to admit that anarchism is an ideology, rooted in a particular historical and cultural tradition. It means that anarchists are not automatically anti-racist, anti-sexist, or anti-imperialist just by virtue of their rejection of the state. Recognising the validity of faith would push a lot of anarchists off their high horse, which would perhaps explain their hostility to religion.

Disobedience only really challenges obedience if it enables new and different kinds of obedience. It therefore makes more sense to speak of 'disobediences' and 'obediences'. Disobediences show that obediences are contingent and can be withdrawn. They show that although we rely on ideologies, norms, rules, and institutions, we often use these in incoherent and disobedient ways.

Chris Rossdale gives the example of a Sisters Against the Arms Trade action that I was part of [1]. We blockaded a missile factory wearing red lipstick. As Rossdale points out, part of the reason we did this was to subvert the idea that radical women should not wear make-up or care about looking pretty. However, our obedience to beauty norms was not purely performative.

I for one also very much wanted to look pretty. I wanted to conform to beauty standards. Being able to use my obedience to beauty norms to disobey and subvert activist norms felt empowering.

Similarly, the disobedience of women wearing hijab and playing punk gigs is not an absence of obedience but a provocative obedience that centres the agency of the women ('We are Lady Parts', p14). The different communities, traditions, and subcultures we are part of expose each other's contingency. Our agency and individuality are grounded in the fact that none of these structures fully owns or defines us. And yet we don't exist without them.

This doesn't mean that we simply pick and choose our beliefs and traditions without fully investing ourselves. That would make both obedience and disobedience meaningless. Similarly, obedience and disobedience would be meaningless if authority was absolute and universal. They would simply be two sides of the same coin.

My Christian faith destabilises anarchist ideology and my anarchist politics destabilises my faith. Wearing make-up challenges macho norms within activist cultures and taking part in direct actions challenges mainstream ideals of femininity. The paradoxical relationship between obedience and disobedience can't be sustained in theory without subordinating one to the other. However, in practice the dynamic between obedience and disobedience is sustained by the incomplete and contradictory nature of our social relationships and identities.

[1] Rossdale C. *Resisting Militarism Direct Action and the Politics of Subversion*

Nora Ziegler is an anarchist organiser and writer.

Called to be faith



Above: The U.S. climate activist Jessica Reznicek was sentenced to 8 years in prison for her protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline Photo: Cristina Yurena Zerr

Cristina Yurena Zerr

To stop the Dakota Access Pipeline from being built, Jessica Reznicek set construction equipment on fire and, with a welder, cut apart sections of pipe. She now faces 8 years of prison for her actions.

On the outskirts of Des Moines, the Mid-western U.S. capital of Iowa, where partially dilapidated houses replace anonymous high-rises, sits a nondescript two-story house with a porch and overgrown yard. This is the place where it all began.

Jessica Reznicek sits in front of a wall covered with posters and newspaper clippings. Behind her hangs a banner that reads 'We are here to protect. Water is life.' Because of her actions for clean water, the 40-year-old will spend the next eight years in prison.

In the eyes of the judiciary, Jessica Reznicek is a domestic terrorist. For others, however, she is a water protector who was willing to risk her freedom for this fight.

After civic life

'Global warming and the growth of the fossil fuel industry, which is horribly out of control and literally burning up the entire planet, is an obvious danger,' Reznicek, meanwhile, says. 'I'm just watching for the last two decades, corporate industry taking over this community and that community, slowly inching away everything that I love, everything about my history and my future and the future of the children in my life.'

Reznicek speaks in a clear, loud voice, and - despite the mostly heavy topics - breaks into laughter again and again. Although she doesn't like being in the spotlight and avoids journalists, she tells her story in vivid words. The story of a feverish search for forms of resistance that are really capable of changing something. Of turbulent resolutions, acts of sabotage - and of the FBI.

The story begins ten years ago when Jessica Reznicek, then a thirty-year-old politics student, leaves her bourgeois life behind to take part in the Occupy Wall Street move-

ful and rebellious

ment in New York. Despite her then-husband's threat that it would mean the end of their relationship. During the protests against the effects of the financial crisis and social inequality, she gets to know the Catholic Worker movement.

This is how the young activist arrives at the collective house with the porch in Des Moines, which would become her base for the next ten years. The Catholic Worker movement is a community consisting of about two hundred autonomously operating 'houses of hospitality' worldwide - about one hundred of them in the USA - where contemplation, self-organisation and non-violent action are lived together in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount.

Christianity and anarchism - lived in radical critique of domination, striving for non-violence and liberation from oppressive conditions - meet here in Des Moines. It is a place where the Christian message of social justice and solidarity with the marginalised becomes practice.

For Reznicek, Des Moines marks the beginning of what she now calls 'conversion': finding her Christian faith and returning to her Catholic roots. Her experiences in the community slowly change her attitude; she reduces her prejudices against religiosity. And: from now on, she wants to work more radically against injustice.

'Jesus was very political,' Reznicek says. 'He was a revolutionary. This is a human, challenging all authority and willing to give his life for what he loves, who he loves. Reading the Scriptures through this lens motivated me a lot in my resistance work.'

'As I'm looking at an uncertain future, my faith is what sustains me when paying the consequences of state repression.'

From Palestine to the Zapatistas

For the Christian activist, a restless search for her place and commitment in and to this world begins from that point on. As part of a peace organization, she flies twice to Israel, where she is deported for protesting in solidarity with the Palestinian people. She visits the Zapatistas in Mexico and spends time with the indigenous people of Guatemala.

In between, she returns to the Catholic Worker community, back in Des Moines. There she lives with other activists, organisers of the Black Lives Matter movement, and people who came to the community in need of a home. The community lives in 'voluntary poverty' and is funded by private donations and odd jobs from its members. Most have a connection to Christianity, and some describe themselves as Catholic. But the movement also includes people who do not believe or believe differently.

Food is served daily at the house for those who don't have a home or are looking for community. It is a meeting place for those who live on the margins of society: Homeless, illegalised, trans people, former prison inmates. On a particularly hot day at the end of July, Jessica Reznicek has her last cooking shift. In front of her is a huge pot of mashed potatoes on the stove, into which she generously adds butter. 'Our guests love butter,' she says with a laugh. On the windowsill in front of her is a statue of a bishop with a rosary draped around him. 'I like the days when I'm in charge of the kitchen,' she says as she begins to wash the mountain of dishes. 'It takes my mind off all the things that are going on in my life.'

A month earlier, on 28 June, the Des Moines court sentenced the Christian activist to eight years in prison for 'conspiracy to

damage an energy production facility,' and 'malicious use of fire.' This is in addition to three years probation and a restitution payment of more than \$3,198,512.70 to the corporation Energy Transfer. The crime was categorized as 'domestic terrorism,' which significantly increased the sentence.

Using all means against the pipeline

It has now been five years since Jessica Reznicek first heard about the Energy Transfer corporation. Back in 2016, the Standing Rock Native Americans began forming a protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline being built by Energy Transfer. The pipeline transports crude oil from the northern U.S. state of North Dakota to southern Patoka, a pipeline hub in Illinois.

The Sioux people have since been fighting the pipeline, which runs near their reservation and poses a major threat to their water resources. Other bodies of water are also at risk because the pipes run under rivers and lakes in many places, which could contaminate drinking water in the event of an accident. In 2019, a leak from the Keystone pipeline, also in North Dakota, spilled about one and a half million gallons of crude oil.

In 2016 and 2017, Reznicek participates in various different actions to prevent the construction of the 1172-mile pipeline. Rallies, protest camps, signature collections. Near the town of Keokuk, Iowa, she builds a barricade to prevent construction workers from drilling. Over the course of a week, she is arrested by police and taken to jail - only to continue blockading the following day. More and more people join the action. But they fail to prevent the drilling. When it begins, Jessica Reznicek resorts to more drastic means.

On the night of 8 November, 2016, when Donald Trump is elected president of the United States, Jessica Reznicek, along with co-defendant Ruby Montoya, set fire to five pieces of construction equipment in Buena Vista County, northwest Iowa. 'When I got home that night, I wasn't sure if that was a good way to use my energy,' she recalls. Instead, she begins fasting in

protest. For two weeks.

But she doesn't think she's building enough pressure with the hunger strike. When she observes construction workers welding the pipeline sections together, she decides to use a welding machine to take the pipes apart again.

Over five months, Reznicek and Montoya use these tactics to fight the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. Then a private security firm hired by the energy company finds out that all the sabotage in Iowa can be traced back to the two Christian activists.

'They started following me everywhere,' Reznicek says. 'Those psychological tactics really wore me down over time. I was really wrestling with having this secret. I knew that I couldn't tell anybody that I was sabotaging the Dakota Access Pipeline because that would incriminate whoever I told. And so, I just had to hold that secret inside of me while I was watching all of this harassment by the pipeline company, that slowly wore me down... This is a huge reason why transparency is so powerful. Because we suffer from our secrets. Our secrets will eat us up. You need to talk with people about the things that are going on in your life. And that became such a toxic thing living inside of me. My sense of spirituality and my sense of what was right started to diminish from being stalked every day and not being able to talk to people about it. So, I decided, essentially, that I was just going to publicly say what I did and take that power back. I decided that that was the only way that I was able to survive this era of my life.'

In July 2017, Reznicek and Montoya explained publicly what they had done to a group of journalists. Three months later, at 4:30 a.m. they heard banging on the door of the community house in Des Moines. 'I ran down the stairs and could see about fifty FBI agents with big guns and vests through the window,' Reznicek recalls. 'I was terrified.' When she opened the door, the FBI rushed in, throwing her to the ground. 'They threw me down on the ground with a huge gun in my face and a foot on my neck.'

The violence of the welding torch

Right here, in front of the wall with the 'Water is life' banner, that's where it happened, she says. Reznicek is receiving criticism not only from the judiciary, but also from her own ranks for the manner of her actions. Many describe the damage to property as violent. Reznicek, on the other hand, believes she acted nonviolently. 'Interestingly, people do not think that the man who used the welder to construct a pipeline that put our very lives under threat was violent. But I hear often a woman using a welder to deconstruct a pipeline as being violent...'

After the raid, Jessica decides to leave: 'After the FBI raid I kind of kept a strong face. I tried to exude confidence. But everything was kind of crumbling internally. One of my oldest coping mechanisms from early on was to run away.'

For a year, Jessica hitchhiked around the United States, without a home. 'I wasn't necessarily underground. I was running and hiding, but not just from the government. I was hiding from everything and everyone.'

When she has a breakdown after ten months in Colorado, she finally realizes she needs help. But it will not come from people or places, but from her relationship with God, Reznicek says. After this experience, she realises she wants to live in a place where she can encounter God. She decides to enter a Benedictine convent as a novice.

'When I arrived there, I knew almost immediately that this was the place I was looking for. I felt a huge weight lifted from me,' Jessica recalls of her first visit to the convent in Duluth, Minnesota. 'I found a freedom so great that I was able to finally release the tears that I've been holding in for so long. I was able to express the fears. I was able to go deeply into scripture.'

But this new life lasts only a short time. Reznicek is picked up again by the FBI and charged. She has to spend the time until the verdict under house arrest.

On 11 August, a month and a half after the sentencing, Jessica Reznicek began her sentence at the women's prison in Wascea, Minneapolis. While in prison, she now plans to continue her education via distance learning to become a social worker. So that when she's back on the outside, she can become part of a network that offers an alternative to calling the police. 'I don't think by any means that there is less work to do in prison. I think there's just as much opportunity to grow and to find joy and to find peace no matter where you are anywhere. I need to believe that I will continue to contribute making this world a better place, no matter where I am.'

(In early November, Reznicek addressed the public for the first time since her incarceration. In a letter published on Twitter, she expresses hope and gratitude for the support she receives. At the same time, she says, she struggles with depression and is still sometimes shocked by where she is.)

Cristina Yurena Zerr is an independent filmmaker and author with a focus on non-violence, antimilitarism and faith based resistance.

Below: Jessica Reznicek cooks for the guests in the Catholic Worker House of Des Moines. Photo: Cristina Yurena Zerr



The parable of the bad apple



What shall we say paradise is like? What parable shall we use to explain it? It is like a bruised apple. The bruised apple becomes food and shelter for worms, fruit flies and all kinds of small creatures. And if it is not separated and thrown out, it will soon infect all the other apples.



The bad apple represents a vulnerability that nurtures. There are times when it is good to be strong and there are times when our weaknesses can make room for others. The bad apple also represents the power of community. Exploitation is maintained by dividing and isolating us. Wherever we come together, solidarity and friendship can grow like mould in a barrel of apples.

Bad Apple



About us

We are a group of friends based in London and the South East who want to engage in conversations about faith and social justice organising. We are Muslim and Christian women, writers and activists.

We are inspired by anarchist, queer, feminist, anti-ableist, anti-colonial, anti-capitalist and anti-racist practices and schools of thought. We believe these perspectives create possibilities for spiritual transformation. However, we also recognise the limitations of pure “isms” and encourage dialectic thought that challenges the boundaries between the secular and the mystical, the political and the personal.

We hope this new zine will inspire you and give you something to think about. We welcome anyone who would like to join our collective or contribute articles, illustrations, cartoons, jokes, whatever. If you’ve been a bad apple, we want to hear from you!

Contact us

Twitter: @BadAppleZine

Instagram: @Bad.Apple.Zine

Website: badapplemagazine.wordpress.com

Rest is Resistance



Lev Taylor

'Take a break,' Moses said to the Israelites. 'I've spoken to God, and we're both very keen on this: you need to take Saturdays off.'

'Yes, we know, we've heard this before,' said the Israelites. 'You told us when we were around that mountain. You told us when we were building the Tabernacle. You said these exact same words only a few weeks ago. You don't need to keep going on about it.'

'I do, though,' said Moses. 'It's really important. I'm telling you now so you get it. 24 hours of rest. 25 if you want to be extra about it. But definitely no less. You need to take a break.'

The Israelites sighed. 'We get it. Tell us something new.'

'OK,' said Moses. 'Take a break. Or I'll kill you. I'm serious now. Not resting on Shabbat is punishable by death. If I catch any of you picking up sticks or lighting fires on Saturdays, that's it. Dead.'

'But why? Why does this matter so much to you?'

'Because,' said Moses, 'For generations, we were slaves. Our whole lives we worked. When our masters had their days off, we still worked, serving them. We broke our backs. We lost touch with what mattered. We forgot how to think. We forgot how to enjoy life. We have a chance here that we've never had before. We can build an entirely new society, where the measure of life isn't how well we work, but how well we rest. If we instill this day of rest with holiness and make it the cornerstone of our society, we can build a community that resists the tyranny of work and the oppression of masters.'

And that was that. Shabbat became enshrined as the hallmark of Jewishness. No more would people exploit each other on their holy days. No more would we be defined by our productivity. Instead, the marker of Jewish observance was how holy we could make this day by refraining from work.

Generations later, our rabbis were faced with a new question. If work was forbidden, what actually was work? Perhaps in the peasant and smallholder society of ancient Israel, it was obvious. But in the new reality

of urban living across a wide diaspora, it was no longer so clear. They needed to know how to make the day holy.

So, they looked to this week's parashah. Here, in this section of Torah, the commandment to honour the Sabbath bookends descriptions of how to build God's dwelling-place. They looked at all the work that must have been involved in creating this momentous desert structure. Lighting fires. Tanning leather. Dying cloth. Joining wood. Polishing stones. Spinning wool. Carrying. Pushing. Lifting. Choosing. Separating. Drawing. Planning.

If this was the work that was required to build God's dwelling place in ancient times, they reasoned, then abstention would be the way to build God's dwelling place today. Just as the performance of work was a holy act in the Torah, not doing the same things could be a holy act in our world. Through their interpretation of this text, our rabbis gave new life to the holiness of Shabbat and the value in not working.

This idea has so much relevance to us today. In 2019, an article circulated entitled '[How Millennials Became the Burnout Generation](#).' It argued that the generation of people now in our twenties and thirties live in a permanent state of overwork and exhaustion. It gives good material reasons why this should be the case.

We were born into post-Soviet, Thatcherite Britain. The dominant idea was that anyone could work hard enough to become rich, and we were educated in a system that reinforced this. By the time we entered the job market, the country was in recession, wages permanently stagnated, housing became completely unaffordable and job security became a rare luxury. As a result, we are primed with a need to work hard, but the rewards for this seem completely unattainable.

I think the reason this article was so widely shared was because it spoke to many

of my peers' lived experiences. I doubt, however, that the issue is generational. I look at the teenagers I am tutoring for bar mitzvah, and I am overwhelmed by how much pressure is on them. They seem to be constantly examined, overburdened with extra-curricular activities, and pushed to constantly improve their CVs, even from the youngest age.

At the same time, I see friends in their fifties and sixties who are permanently exhausted. I recently asked an older friend how he was doing. He answered that he wasn't sure if he was tired from sickness or just living out the regular fatigue that comes from working. We are, as an entire society, exhausted and struggling to keep our heads above water.

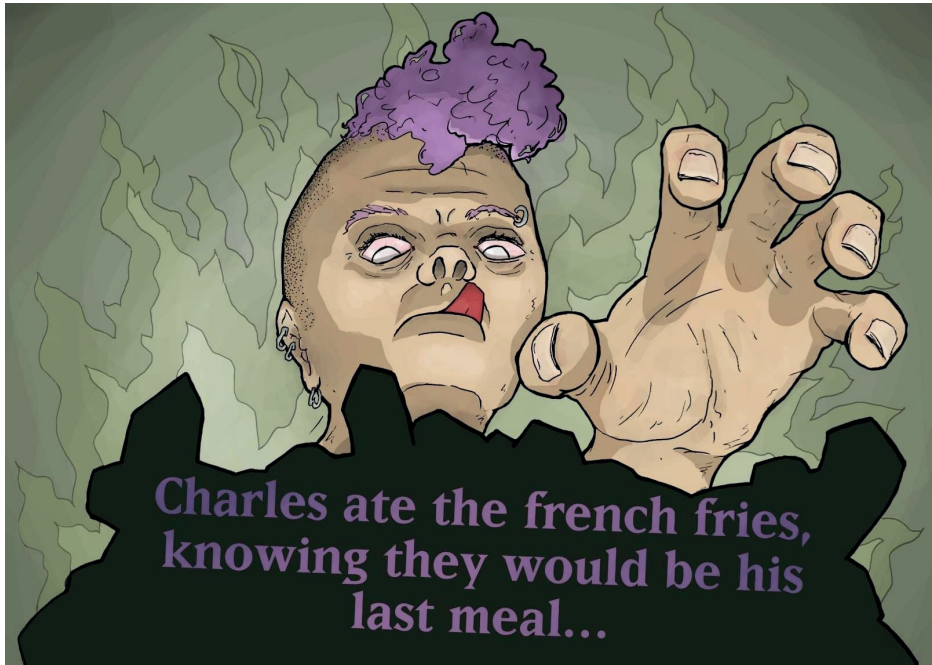
This systemic problem may feel insurmountable. Yet there is one thing we can do. We can do what our ancestors did when they left slavery and decided to institute their own rules. We can do what our rabbis did when they were confronted with urban living and needed to re-imagine work. That is: we can shift our focus.

Against a culture that sees work as the end of human existence, we can prioritise rest. In a world that demands us to be constantly online, we can switch off. In a society that tells us we are isolated competitors, we can build meaningful community. We can insist that we do not live to work, but we work to live. Our lives do not have meaning because of how productive we are, but because of how much compassion we can put into this world.

Against the crushing pressure of modern capitalism, Judaism continues to issue forth a two-word rallying cry of protest: Shabbat shalom!

Lev Taylor is a trainee rabbi, who just completed his final dissertation in Marxist approaches to Torah

Exvangelical Nihilism



Above: Randomly generated meaning by Sam G.

Sam G.

When I say that I'm a nihilist it never seems to really be taken seriously. To some people it seems so obvious a position that it's barely worth mentioning. Other people likely dismiss me as not really being serious. I think part of the reason for this is that, outwardly, I probably don't show much evidence of being a nihilist. I don't have a "f*** everything!" attitude. Or live as if nothing mattered. In fact, I generally act as if I have very strongly held egalitarian values. So how do these two pictures come together? Is my nihilism just intellectual, not deeply rooted enough to affect my behaviour? Or is my sunny disposition deeply rooted enough to not be affected by my nihilism? Perhaps I've just read too much Nietzsche and am being edgy on purpose? My (tentative) answer is that this is because being a

nihilist isn't necessarily very nice. It's a bit like believing in God but hating them (not an uncommon experience, I believe). So, nihilism doesn't necessarily push me to behave misanthropically, but, like any other belief about the world, it does open up its own ways of thinking and being.

I see nihilism as the conviction that the meanings we give things have no ultimate grounding in anything else. The universe is effectively indifferent to us – we are just another animal species carving out a space for ourselves to survive, and not special in any cosmic sense. Most religions assert a source of meaning and value beyond the human world, and following these values becomes a choice with moral (and often eternal) consequences. For a nihilist, meanings have only social consequences, insofar as morality is simply another value on the same level as those that it judges

over. In this sense nihilism is generally atheistic, though it is certainly compatible to an extent with many other belief systems. Talking about 'meanings' and 'values' gets confusing very quickly since we can mean all kinds of different things by them. Saying "waving means hello" is very different to "my children give meaning to my life", for example. Nihilism tends to focus more on the second example here, and is often stereotyped as implying that nothing matters, or that there is no point to anything.

However, I certainly do believe that things matter, that they are important and that they have meaning. I simply limit the scope of those meanings, taking human beliefs and values to be of the same order as everything else in nature – they are created in specific circumstances, they live, evolve, and eventually disappear, leaving traces on the world but never tapping into any universal or deeper truth. For me, values are still real, in the sense that they change the world, but their realness goes no further than the human lives they touch. Most of the values of a thousand years ago are lost to us and so will our values be to future humans. Thus, our meanings have a shifting foundation, and this is the truth that gives sense to our social, political, or moral system. One consequence of this is that the possibility of ethical or moral claims and the strength of their justification is limited – they become wrapped up in lots of qualifiers 'right for us', 'destabilises our community', 'desirable for this group of people in this time and place' etc. Nihilism therefore casts meaning as a specifically human construction and nothing more – the natural world doesn't have meaning as far as we can tell, even if sometimes animals and natural systems behave as if things did have meaning for them. Meaning is a layer that humans add between themselves and the world and, to my mind, is most likely directly related to our evolved use of language and abstract thinking.

But where did my nihilism come from? As I said before, I'm not very obviously a nihilist. I'm not belligerent like Richard Dawkins and his new atheists, for example.

Nor do I lack respect for people with faith. For me, nihilism is where I have ended up retreating to as confidence in other 'truths' has been steadily stripped away; a wall I've eventually found at my back. Nothing I believe is held so deeply that it couldn't be unseated, and though this is a tendency I've had since I was a child, the impossibility of objective truth is something that has been reinforced for me again and again.

I was raised in an evangelical Christian family and went to church until I was allowed to stop, around the age of eleven or twelve. As it was a fundamental part of my family's life (my dad is still an elder in the church), I continued to have contact with it through my teenage years. I don't have significant experience of other denominations or religions to compare, but evangelicals tend to claim for themselves a rich and close personal relationship with God/Jesus, one perhaps deeper and more meaningful than in the cultural belonging and ritual of Catholicism or Anglicanism, for example. So, my early life was coloured by repeated claims of closeness to God, behaviour suggesting the direct touch of God's spirit and moral directives supported by God's active guidance. Rites of passage were supposed to bring you closer in this relationship and knit the congregation together. It was a strong, even overbearing narrative, and for many years I strove to access this experience too. However, despite my earnest attempts I never had a single experience of the divine. Not even religious euphoria, which I would consider one of the most likely claimed experiences to be purely psychological. My disenchantment eventually turned into disinterest, and I left the church behind. It was only many years later that I reconsidered my personal connection to Christian belief, and to my family. In my twenties I went, humbly, to many of those that I considered most convinced of the truth of their faith – including my father who was still an elder – and asked for the details of their religious experience. I reasoned that if their claims of a benevolent creator God were true, then contact with the divine ought to

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We are Lady Parts

Ghazal Tipu

We Are Lady Parts tickled me, inspired me and I wanted more. Channel 4's subversive six-part drama on Muslim female punk band Lady Parts was finally telling a story of Muslim women as normal people who swore, who desired, who were fucked up.

There was a strange sense of being seen and known, watching a comedy about brown Muslim women - a mirror of myself on screen.

I like protagonist Amina. At 26 she is desperate to settle down with the gnawing sense of being left behind. That is what it felt like as a twenty-something Muslim student - that angst observing the 'brothers' and 'sisters' getting paired up and worrying you'd be left on the shelf. There was that sexual energy charging through the Muslim students and those furtive glances across the common room. Here *Lady Parts* observe that Amina is 'horny'. Amina agrees to join the band in exchange for a date with 'Bashir with the good beard'. In sexually repressed south Asian culture, the discussion of sex and desire is still a taboo, whatever happens behind closed doors. *We are Lady Parts* names Muslim women's sexual desire.

Amina goes through a journey of embracing her singleness and making a group of friends in *Lady Parts* who are vibrant, sassy and are just glad to be making music. I wish I could go back in time to my 26-year-old self and say: "You'll be unmarried in your thirties. Don't fritter away your energy over thoughts

of marriage and just grab life". In this series, this motley crew of women is doing precisely just that.

Then there's Lady Part's foul language – wow. But Muslim women really aren't monolithic creatures. Here they are injected with a real humanness. Each character is lovingly and competently crafted. Amina is a hopeless romantic. Lead singer Saira is grappling with fears of intimacy and dealing with estrangement from her family. Ayesha is queer and not yet out to her family. Bisma is the peacekeeper and a wife and mother and Momtaz wears a niqab – the traditional face covering - and is the manager of the band. These young women have dreams, fears, desires, and idiosyncrasies. Kudos to writer Nida Manzoor for crafting these characters.

Momtaz particularly subverts stereotypes. A journalist interviews Momtaz for an inside scoop on the band and Momtaz tells her she feels confident wearing a niqab. The niqab is of course always associated with docility and meekness. Like Nora explores in her article, *Obedience and Disobedience*, Momtaz's obedience liberates her.

It was refreshing to experience these Muslim women and their journeys on screen as normal people, debunking the homogeneity of Muslim women in popular culture. Yes, there are Muslim women who are meek and oppressed. But the women I knew at university and in the Big Smoke went on to become barristers, solicitors, and researchers, while during summer holidays in Pakistan I met aunts who were the matriarchs of their families.

This programme was subversive on many levels. Where does that prevalent view come from about Muslim women being oppressed and marginalised? Portraying Muslim women who empower themselves is a challenge to prevailing norms. If I think about representations of Muslim women in popular culture, I rack my brain and no character springs to mind. Now that we have *We are Lady Part* – I can think of a fair few. More please Channel 4.

Exvangelical Nihilism

Sam G.

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be undeniable – before the divine, our own world ought to seem like a shadow. At the very least having a personal relationship with such a being must feel more real than a relationship with another human. This was my test: human experience in general contains so much weirdness that serious, widespread religious belief should require a much higher bar of evidence than, say, claims about UFOs or the spiritual significance of mushrooms. These are belief systems that have lasted centuries and been tempered by many, many different minds, from brilliant theologians to industrious peasants. Some of the Christians I've spoken to about this have been scientifically minded, and all have professed that faith and revelation must be experienced personally and cannot give way to reason or evidence.

To my horror, my investigations revealed only vague and uncertain spiritual experiences: strong faith but nothing that could not be put down to wishful thinking or mundane psychological effects. No-one I've asked has had any experience that is so much more 'real' or exceptional that it must not belong to this world or be an effect of the human mind. If communion with God is no more potent than drugs then, for me, God almost certainly cannot exist. All of the moral authoritarianism of my upbringing was, it turned out, based on a hope. I have to say, my quest really ended there. It seemed to me so unlikely that widening the net would bear any fruit that I gave up almost all interest in the spiritual or divine. So, I am left with a sceptical nihilism that is almost an agnosticism – I don't discount any tale of supernatural realities beyond my immediate world and senses, I just don't put a lot of stock in other humans as reliable sources of them. Without finding any convincing evidence for the intrinsic value of values, I am left with what is given to me.

And yet, for me the belief that values go no further than

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Exvangelical Nihilism

Sam G.

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those of my community and the ones I select for myself hasn't yet led me to great crimes. What I believe it has given me is a deep pragmatism and an openness to difference, a flight from dogmatism. Nihilism is still dangerous – there is no real bulwark against fascistic values except the weight of social conscience, which is of course fickle and changeable. For me this danger is always visible on the horizon and makes a society built on a nihilist foundation a terrifying prospect. However, for my part the values I follow and choose are shaped by bringing joy and love to the world around me. To say that everything is ultimately meaningless is not to say that no experience is enjoyable or meaningful for me but is also not to say that the values of society more broadly are empty and should be discarded.

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