

The Gospel of Anarchy? Reflections on Christian Anarchism

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I. Introduction

It can be tempting to oversimplify when writing about Christian anarchism. From a Christian perspective, it might seem obvious that, if anarchism means a rejection of all forms of government, then anarchism is irreconcilable with Christianity. After all, Romans 13:1–7 seems to be a clear defense of the God-ordained authority of the government. Or, perhaps conversely, one could appeal to 1 Samuel 8 as evidence that the establishment of a government was a rejection of God. This, then, might be interpreted as clear evidence that the teachings of the Bible are anarchistic.

On the other side of the debate, Mikhail Bakunin's *God and the State* stands as a particularly damning critique of all forms of religion from an anarchist perspective. According to Bakunin, humanity can never be free so long as it bows before any master, earthly or celestial. Thus, he writes, "*if God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him*" (Bakunin, 1970, p. 28). His reasoning is difficult to deny: how could an anarchist—one who rejects all relationships based on hierarchy and power—bow down in worship of God, however good and loving that God is supposed to be?



In the present piece, I hope to avoid oversimplifying Christian anarchism. In the first place, it is my view that Christian anarchism—whether it be right, wrong, or somewhere in between—is a fascinating tradition of thought and action that deserves our attention. So, my primary goal is not simply to defend or critique this tradition, but to consider it, to take it as a serious challenge to reflect on the relationship of Christianity to violence and power. As an American, I am deeply concerned by the ways that dominant forms of Christianity have become so intimately bound up with particular political aims, which are always pursued through more or less violent means. From this perspective, I take Christian anarchism as a powerful critique of the entanglement of Christianity with

party politics, with the glorification of violence, with the desire for power, etc.

Among the most famous figures associated with Christian anarchism, Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Jacques Ellul, and Vernard Eller stand out. Important “proto-Christian anarchists” include Petr Chelcicky, Gerard Winstanely, and William Blake. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos has made significant contributions to the contemporary growth in academic interest in the history and theory of Christian anarchism, and authors such as Mäki Ashe van Steenwyk and Nekeisha Alayna Alexis (both of whom are associated with the online journal *Jesus Radicals*) have made important theoretical and practical contributions in recent years.

At this point, several helpful introductions to Christian anarchism have been written.¹ While this piece assumes no prior knowledge of Christian anarchism on the part of the audience, I do hope to do more than simply repeat what has already been said.

II. Violence and Revolution

Typically, Christian anarchism is rooted in the basic claim that the logical political implication of biblical teaching—especially Jesus’ teachings—is anarchism. According to Jacques Ellul, for example, “biblical thought leads directly to anarchism” (Ellul, 1980, p. 15). This claim is often supported with reference to the Sermon on the



Crucifixió, de Graham Sutherland.

Mount, which is interpreted as a collection of ethical teachings that are relevant for socio-political life and not just for private morality.² Tolstoy, for example, insists that “Jesus meant neither more nor less than what he said” (2009, p. 16). In other words, Christian anarchists do not want to shy away from the radical implications of taking Jesus’ teachings literally. At least implicitly, then, Christian anarchists challenge the idea that the primary goal of Christianity is personal salvation. Rather,

¹ See, for example, Christoyannopoulos (2011), van Steenwyk (2012), Alexis-Baker (2006), and Underwood and Vallier (2020).

² For a very helpful (critical) examination of Christian anarchist biblical exegesis, see Meggit (2017).

for these thinkers, Christianity is about attempting to live according to Jesus' teachings and thereby to build a better, more just world. Accordingly, they argue, it is possible "to embrace God as Christians and reject masters as anarchists" (Alexis-Baker, 2006, p. 78).

Moreover, Christian anarchism has been consistently committed to nonviolence, if not total pacifism. Often, this commitment serves as both the inaugural moment of Christian anarchist ideas and as a particularly stark point of disagreement between Christian and non-Christian anarchists. Tolstoy, for example, writes: "The Anarchists are right in everything; in the negation of the existing order and in the assertion that, without Authority there could not be worse violence than that of Authority under existing conditions. They are mistaken only in thinking that anarchy can be instituted by a violent revolution" (1990, p. 68).

With few exceptions, non-Christian anarchists have rejected pacifism, often viewing it as fundamentally opposed to core anarchist commitments.³ However, unlike Tolstoy, who seems to grant this basic difference between non-Christian anarchism and his Christian pacifism, subsequent Christian anarchists have attempted to defend nonviolence on *both* Christian *and* anarchist grounds. Ellul goes so far as to define anarchy as "an absolute rejection of violence" (2011a, p. 11).

What is noteworthy in this identification of anarchism with nonviolence is that, typically, Christian anarchists have begun with an interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount as an ethical blueprint for Christian life. When the Sermon is the starting point, these authors believe that radical implications follow. The case for nonviolence is rooted in Jesus' words: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer" (Matt. 5:38–39). Christian anarchists and pacifists read this as a clear command to remain nonviolent, especially considering that, according to Walter Wink, the verb that is translated as "resist" in this passage should be understood as implying "violent rebellion, armed revolt, sharp dis-sension" (Wink, 2003, p. 13).

The next step of the argument, then, is to point out that "The state is founded on the very thing that Jesus prohibits" (Christoyannopoulos, 2011, p. 44). Accordingly, the Christian, insofar as she is called to radical nonviolence, cannot endorse the state in all its violence. Thus, Christian pacifism leads naturally to Christian anarchism. And this version of anarchism is inextricably tied to the commitment to nonviolence.

Non-Christian anarchists might object that, if these Christian pacifists are opposed to the existence of the state on pacifist grounds, that does not make them *anarchists*. After all, "anarchism" means more than simply opposition to

³ See, for example, Gelderloos (2018).

the state. Minimally, anarchists are committed to both radical antiauthoritarianism *and* radical egalitarianism.⁴ And, as it happens, anarchists have objected to pacifism for violating both commitments. Pacifism, it is argued, maintains rather than challenges the status quo, and therefore cannot meaningfully be connected to radical antiauthoritarianism. Furthermore, according to this line of critique, pacifism is a privilege of the mostly white, liberal, middle class. Thus, not only does pacifism maintain the top-down status quo of the state, it also maintains—insofar as it rests upon—the economic inequalities of

capitalism. Accordingly, the conclusion is drawn that a pacifist cannot be an anarchist. Pair this critique with Bakunin's critique of religion, and it seems unavoidable to conclude that "Christian anarchism" is an impossibility.

How might the Christian anarchist respond to the anarchist here? There are, I think, at least three possible responses: (1) one might appeal to the arguments of someone such as Tolstoy, according to whom *violence*, rather than nonviolence, is authoritarian and so maintains the status quo. (2) One could point out the *prefigurative* nature of nonviolence—namely, that the demand for consistency between means and ends is better met by nonviolence than violence. And (3) one could argue that nonviolence works better than violence.

Tolstoy argues that violence is slavery because violence involves forcing someone to do something against their will. Accordingly, he concludes that oppression cannot be eliminated through violent means: "all attempts to abolish slavery by violence are like extinguishing fire with fire, stopping water with water, or filling up one hole by digging another." This equation of all violence with slavery is unlikely to persuade many (myself included), but I do think the case could be made that violence is at least as likely as nonviolence to maintain the authoritarian *status quo*. I have argued elsewhere (Underwood, 2018) that both violence and nonviolence can be manipulated to work in the favor



Crist a la Creu, de Benito Prieto

⁴ For example, Peter Kropotkin describes anarchism as "the no-government system of socialism," (2002, p. 46) and Emma Goldman argues that anarchism brings together "individual liberty and economic equality." (2013, p. 16)

of maintaining the status quo: violent protests are likely to legitimize a violent state response in the eyes of many, and non-violent protests can be easily controlled if not outright ignored by those in power. This certainly is not the same point that Tolstoy is making, but I think it suggests that debates over whether violence or nonviolence better challenges authority are more ambiguous than it may seem.

The passage from Tolstoy also leads into the point about prefiguration, or consistency between means and ends. Christian anarchists argue that the cycle of violence can only be escaped through nonviolence. As Ellul writes, “Violence begets violence—*nothing else*” (2011b, p. 100). Similarly, Dorothy Day writes, “the means become the end” (2001, p. 70). Violent means lead to violent ends. Thus, the anarchist demand for prefiguration may in fact be better met through nonviolence rather than violence. If this is the case, then Christian anarchists may be more consistently anarchist in their commitments to nonviolence than it first appears.

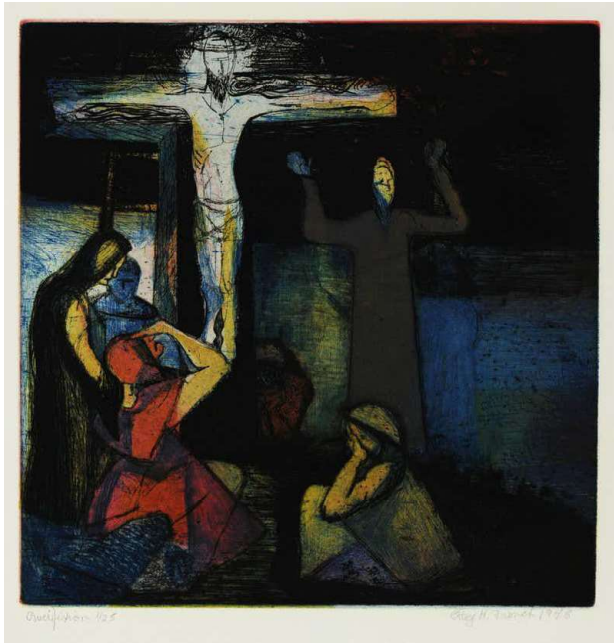
The more difficult question is that of efficacy. If nonviolence is ineffective against violence—that is, if nonviolence does *not* lead to nonviolent ends—then the foregoing may be moot after all. The question of what “works” is difficult to answer. The simple answer, it seems, is that it depends. Due to this ambiguity, I am not convinced that asking what works is in fact especially salient is here. Sometimes what is morally right is less effective, and

sometimes it is not. In any case, revolutions, it seems, are always violent. Day acknowledges this in her assessment of communism: “the Communists believe that violence will come (So do we when it comes down to it, though we are praying it won’t.)” (2001, p. 70). Even advocates of nonviolence must be realistic.

Not only are revolutions violent, however, but it also seems that revolutions usually lead to violent ends. Even revolutions in favor of just causes very often end with a new authoritarian regime. Ellul makes this point in *Violence*: “Whenever a violent movement has seized power, it has made violence the law of power. The only thing that has changed is the person who exercises violence. No government established by violence has given the people either liberty or justice—only a show of liberty (for those who supported the movement) and a show of justice (which consists in plundering the erstwhile “haves”)” (2011b, p. 101).

I think this helps illustrate the insight of Vernard Eller’s anti-revolutionary interpretation of Christian anarchism: according to Eller, the Christian anarchist is not revolutionary because revolutions involve the replacement of one human “arky” with another (1999, p. 3). Such competitions for power can hardly be expected to lead to the end of hierarchical political organization. To be sure, depending on how narrowly we use the term “rule,” it is likely true that we are always ruled by something—which is to say that we also have

an “arky.” But to be ruled by love and justice is quite different from being ruled by violence and top-down power.



Crucifixió, de Ray H. French.

III. The Kingdom of God

Jesus said both, “The Kingdom of God is among you” (Luke 17:21) and “My kingdom is not of this world.” (John 18:36) Taken together, I think these passages present a picture of the Kingdom of God not as an otherworldly monarchy, but as a counter-political kingdom stirring within the present world. It is not a kingdom of “this world” because it is not a kingdom of power and violence—which is why I call it “counter-political.” It is not political, nor is it apolitical or even anti-political. It is a way of being that is fundamentally *other* to the all-too-human ways of power and violence. Van Steenwyk calls this the “un-

Kingdom of God” because, although it is described as a kingdom, it is nothing like a human kingdom.

And what about the God of this “unKingdom”? Is God not still the absolute source of authority for the Christian? Perhaps so, but, once again, we must ask, if God is the “arky,” just what kind of “arky” is God? According to Ellul, “the true face of the biblical God is love” (2011, 53). Thus, if the “arky” of the Christian is *love*, this may not violate anarchist anti-authoritarianism after all.

Moreover, if we insist on centralizing God’s *power*, I think we risk constructing a very human-looking God. The desire for power—and the tendency to resort to violence when power is not easily won—is utterly human. I see nothing divine about it. Indeed, we are told that Jesus *gave up* power, not only through his incarnation, but also again when Satan offered Jesus the kingdoms of the world. Even Jesus’ victory over death—whether we take it literally or symbolically—could be read in terms of *liberation* rather than a simple display of power. As Paul Ricœur argues, the logic of Jesus is a paradoxical logic of superabundance, of “so much more” (1995, pp. 279–283).

There is nothing surprising or revelatory about the logic of power. But the logic of power is always relative: whoever happens to be the most powerful is victorious. And what if it turns out that God is love but not all-powerful? Would we

seek a new God who may not be love but is all-powerful? I certainly hope not. Instead, I am inclined to agree with thinkers such as John Caputo, who writes of the cross: “The sacredness lies in the cries of protest that rise up from the scene. The event to be willed here is the depth of outrage at the injustice of imperial power, of the crushing of the Kingdom by worldly forces. The divinity lies in the identification of the name of God, for Jesus was the *eikon* of God, not with Roman power but with an innocent victim of that power, not with retribution but with the act of forgiveness that is attributed to Jesus by the evangelists” (2007, p. 63).

From this perspective, the God of Jesus is not a God of power, not a sovereign master of the universe, who is worshipped *because* of this power, but a God who promises an “unKingdom” in which love and forgiveness are the “arkys.” This kingdom is already among us, but it does not become real without human action. In this regard, I like to read Luke 24—in which Jesus appears as a stranger on the road to Emmaus—as a dramatic explication of the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25: to welcome the stranger is to welcome Christ, and to welcome Christ is to welcome the king of the “unKingdom” of God.

IV. Conclusion

Does the foregoing prove the truth of the Christian anarchist position? That is for the reader to decide, although I honestly

doubt it. There are many questions I have not addressed. But I hope to have shown that an “anarchic” interpretation of Christianity goes deeper than simply theorizing about how society might function without a centralized, hierarchical state apparatus. These political-theoretical questions can be useful, to be sure, but what I find more compelling about Christian anarchism is its challenge to understand Christianity differently—to understand it not as a religion of private morality, personal salvation, and devotion to the all-powerful, absolute monarch of an otherworldly kingdom, but rather one of following the way of Jesus, which is the way love, forgiveness, hospitality, and nonviolence. This way runs utterly contrary to the human ways of power and violence. And this way is not a blueprint for an ideal political order; it is not practical enough for that. But neither is it apolitical or quietist. (I am convinced that Jesus, too, was not apolitical). To live according to the teachings of Jesus is to live anarchically, to live according to the anarchic Kingdom of God, which is here, now, but is not of this world.

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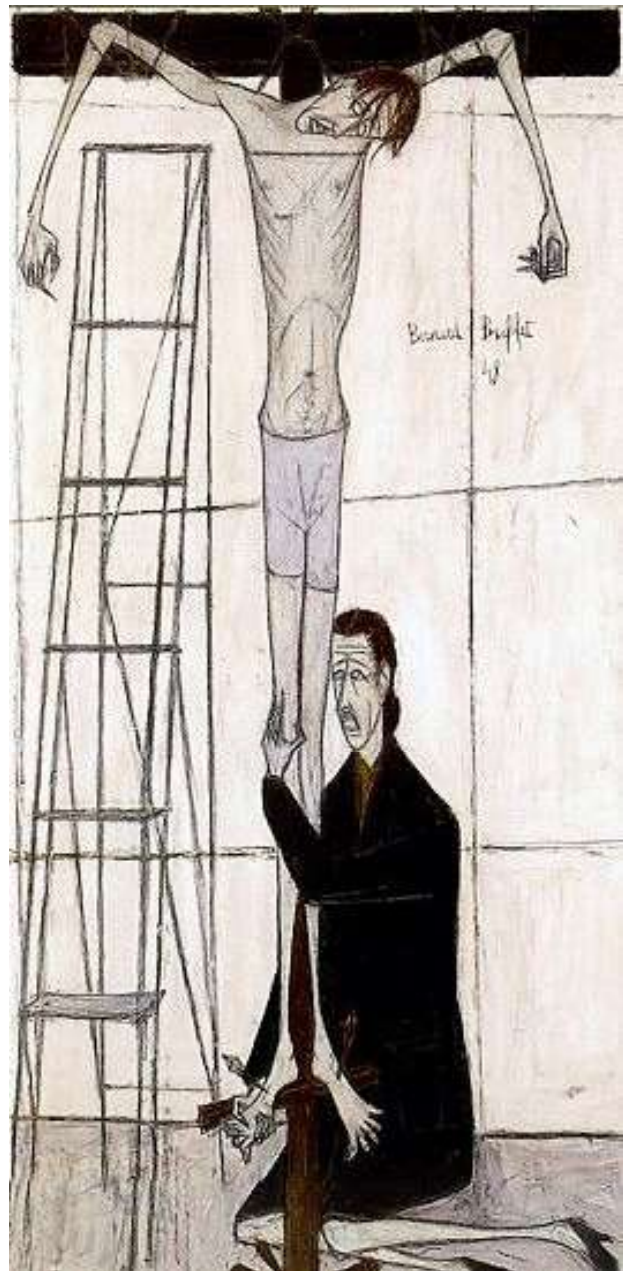
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