It's Only Shorthand for a Cluster of Ideas and Practices

(or: it's one of many inspirations for present and future)

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‘Christian anarchism’ is a label sometimes used in Jesus Radicals circles. In a December 2011 call and response between Amaryah Armstrong and Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, Amaryah asked Nekeisha whether she had to ‘be an anarchist’. She argued that the term ‘does not sit well’ with her because of the ‘irony of Christian anarchy being anti-domination and yet being predicated on domination by White men’, and went on to make her case. Nekeisha replied that ‘it depends on how we define “anarchist”’, and responded to several of Amaryah’s points. Their thought-provoking dialogue touches on the common difficulty of how to define ideological labels in political thought. I’d like to offer some thoughts on this from my perspective – that is, some thoughts on ‘Christian anarchism’ as a label, on why I like it, on problems associated with it, and perhaps on how we can decide whether and when to use it – and this, from the perspective of a white man from an international European background spending unhealthy amounts of time in academic settings.

‘Christian anarchism’ as a cluster of ideas

Political scientists use ideological labels to describe collections of ideas valued and practiced by many, and to classify different types of political ideals. These political ideologies evolve over time, take different flavours in different contexts, interact with one another and generate further sub-categories. They also inevitably have fringe groups or ideological clusters that only share some core beliefs whilst disagreeing on others. ‘Anarchism’, for instance, typically captures a blend of anti-statism, anti-capitalism, anti-clericalism (if not militant atheism), and bottom-up activism and organising. However, even this particular blend of ideas might be disputed by some. Anarchism has evolved from Goldman to Graeber, takes different nuances in France or South Korea, and can come in queer, green, syndicalist or many other varieties – some of which, such as Christian anarchism, are not welcomed by all.

I use ‘Christian anarchism’ as a label to describe works by a number of different authors and activists – such as Tolstoy, Ellul, Eller, Andrews, Clairborne, Catholic Workers such as Day, Maurin and Hennacy, others at the ‘fringes’ like Yoder, Cavanaugh, and Myers, and many more. These are, it’s true, mostly white males, which admittedly demonstrates Amaryah’s point about their historical dominance. At the same time, this unrepresentative dominance need not continue or prevent a broadening of the Christian anarchist ‘church’[1], and there may even be room for revisionist historiography to question this apparently established dominance.

What earns them the shared ‘Christian anarchism’ label is that (in their writings at least) they derive ‘anarchist’ conclusions from ‘Christian’ premises. ‘Christian’ here can mean anything from a strict Tolstoyan emphasis on the moral teaching of Jesus to embracing Christian liturgy or local church activities, while ‘anarchism’ can mean anything from passionate criticism of armies and prisons to the prefigurative embodiment of non-hierarchical collective life. The point is that they all derive political views and practices usually associated with ‘anarchism’ from their take on ‘Christianity’.

Beyond this main commonality of deriving ‘anarchism’ from ‘Christianity’, if we zoom in a bit on their common ideas, we notice that these Christian anarchists tend to a pacifist critique of violence and commitment to non-violent methods; a preference for love and forgiveness; a denunciation of the state’s enforcement of economic inequality, and indeed of the state itself

[1] In the UK, “church” can be used simply to mean “community” or “group.”

as idolatry; some criticism of institutional churches; and a vision of the ideal church as 'a new society in the shell of the old'. These shared views, emanating from their political reading of Jesus' mission, brings Christian anarchists close to similar anarchist or anarcho-pacifist ideologies. All that and much more is supposed to be captured by the ideological label or category of political thought referred to as 'Christian anarchism'.

Adam Clark, a British Christian anarchist, recently said to me: 'The reason I like the term Christian anarchism is that it seems to have a history of individuals I greatly admire. It also reflects a political element with Jesus as the nonviolent revolutionary.' I agree. What I like about the label is that it points to a specific group of people who despite holding a variety of very different and interesting views also share a number of core ideas. The label also provides an excuse to take seriously the radical political implications of Jesus' moral teaching. The many activists and authors who today adopt the label often do so precisely to associate themselves with these people and their ideas, with the revolutionary reading of Jesus, and with contemporary fellow travellers who share the same perspective.

Using labels: context and intentions

As with any ideological label, however, you inevitably hit difficulties. Mark Van Steenwyk's brilliant primer on Christian anarchism does a good job of showing how tricky it is to even define either 'anarchism' or 'Christianity' – let alone 'Christian anarchism' or its place within the other two traditions. As Mark notes, the matter isn't helped by the lack of 'a successive chain of radical Christianity' which we could call 'Christian anarchist'. The 'Christian anarchism' label refers not so much to a continuous stream or school of thought than to a list of Christians with anarchist impulses cropping up in different contexts.

This context, however, is important. In the history of political thought, there has long been a fundamental disagreement about people's ability to accurately ascertain the ideas and practices from a foreign time and place. Although some thinkers say we can read and understand authors from very different contexts – that Plato and Jesus can be intelligible to us – others say that those contexts are too different, and the meaning ascribed to (often translated) words too uncertain to really understand perspectives from contexts outside our own. Quentin Skinner, a famous scholar in this debate, offers a tool that might help surmount the impasse. He argues that to understand a point of view, we must ask what the *intention* of the author is. What did the author mean to say? How did she or he intend that message to be heard? Was the intention to intervene in a debate, change something or have a certain impact there and then?

Among Tolstoy's intentions, for example, one can include the hope that the Tsarist state would collapse and be outgrown by a bottom-up network of agrarian communes practicing the teachings of Jesus. In writing his material on anarchism and Christianity, Ellul's intention was at least in part to illustrate to secular anarchists the anarchist tendencies in the Bible. When Maurin wrote his 'easy essays', his intention was to inspire *Catholic Worker readers* to 'comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable'. When Cavanaugh evokes the term 'anarchism', it is usually intended for *theologians* to reconsider the contrast between the state's myth of salvation and the Christian one. Each wrote with different intentions and with different audiences in mind, and these differences need to be respected when grouping these people under the same label.

It may well be, sometimes, that the 'Christian anarchism' label is not particularly helpful, even in conveying ideas that others might consider 'Christian anarchist'. What people intend to communicate sometimes might be better served without that label. Tolstoy, after all, was loathe to use the a-word because of its association (especially then) with political violence and assassinations. He felt the 'anarchism' label was unhelpful given his intentions. His writings do fit very well the cluster of ideas associated with that label today, but his reservations, in his context, are understandable. His intention in rejecting the 'anarchist' label was to distance himself from political violence. Similarly, others in different contexts may well reject the 'Christian anarchist' label as a way of clarifying their intentions.

'Christian anarchist' intentions today

Nekeisha's characterisation of 'Christian anarchism' as a 'Brangelina-esque "squish name"', for example, seems clearly intended to affirm that for her and in her own life, the two are separate and in fruitful dialogue. She identifies as a 'Christian who is an anarchist' because she (in my view rightly) sees 'tensions' between the two. Her preferred label captures her take on these ideas. So even if one can look in from a different context and make the case that Nekeisha's position remains close to the 'Christian anarchist' cluster of ideas, her own unease with the term is important and helps clarify her political and ideological intentions.

Conversely, my own intention in lumping a variety of authors into a single study called 'Christian anarchism' was to present a consolidated and academic interpretation of the gospels which argued that the politics implied in Jesus' teaching tends towards 'anarchism'. The intention, that is, was to focus squarely on their 'overlap'. Sometimes I playfully refer to them as 'Christian (anarchists)' – the intention being to suggest that what can be described as 'anarchist' follows or should be implicit in 'Christianity'.

Amaryah is understandably suspicious of another ideology that is dominated by white men – after all they already dominate the (traditional) political and intellectual history of the West, not to mention the global economy and so much else. 'White supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity' do need to be denounced as she says. It's possible that 'Christian anarchism' may not always provide the explicit or cutting edge critique of these, but some emerging voices are changing this. 'Christian anarchism' need not be intrinsically incompatible with sharper critiques articulating strong arguments from different quarters on this issue. So if the intention of those who identify as 'Christian anarchist' is to point to ways of 'challenging domination at all levels of the social order' from a Christian position, then that appears to align with her stated interests. But if the intention is to create a 'space for white folks [only] to organize under', then she's got reasons to question the movement. The Christian anarchists I've encountered tend to share this impulse to question domination, but so do other critical voices such as Queer Black Feminists.

Ultimately, what matters is arguably the perceived content of a label: what one means to say when using it. For me 'Christian anarchism' means things like valuing and embodying what Jesus taught as regards the Golden Rule, refraining from condemning others about their alleged immorality when full of faults ourselves, caring for the afflicted, 'non-violence' and 'turning the other cheek', forgiveness and so on. Moreover, I see 'Christian anarchism' as a serious attempt to reflect on (and be more critical about) what we do to one another in our interactions and through

our institutions today. What Jesus was preaching was a pretty radically different way of relating to one another, which also implicitly threatens some of the practices that we engage in through 'states' and as actors in the global 'capitalist' political economy.

But you don't have to be an 'anarchist' or a 'Christian' to have these values or seek this kind of change. Many Christians and many anarchists have this kind of intention, but many non-Christians and non-anarchists have them too. Labels are useful for intellectual inquiry, to help compare and contrast different perspectives, but they needn't become walls in activist practice. If we share political intentions, let's organise and work towards shared hopes together.

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