

Anarchist Threads in Church History

A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 2

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2011

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In my previous article, I tried to offer some introductory definitions of “anarchism” and “Christianity”—which are both too complex to define. This, therefore, presents some challenges in presenting a simple description to “Christian anarchism.”

In part two, I’ll briefly trace those historical Christian movements that express an “anarchic impulse.” What follows is by no means exhaustive. My goal in sharing them is to show that Graeber is right: “the basic principles of anarchism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid—referred to forms of human behavior they assumed to have been around about as long as humanity.”¹ Christian history has a number of examples that demonstrate an anarchic impulse and it is illustrative to see the common features between these groups. Notice that, for most of these groups, the anarchic tendencies of each group was intertwined with their own spiritual and theological convictions. It is important to see that there is something deeply lacking when we imagine a Christian anarchism that simply “slaps together” one’s Christianity and one’s anarchism. It is not only possible, but (I believe) necessary to have an anarchism that flows out of one’s spirituality (or, perhaps, vice versa).

So, what are some expressions of Christianity that authentically express the anarchic impulse?

A Brief Stroll Through History

The Early Church, some argue, was anarchistic. This is, of course, a bold claim. Everyone claims that the heart of their version of Christianity is expressed by the early church. Some of the early Christian communities seem to have practiced certain features of anarchism.

For example, the Jerusalem group, as described in Acts, shared their money and labor equally and fairly among the members. There are also indications of consensus decision making (Acts 15). Within Pauline Christianity, there are glimpses of mutual submission rather than hierarchy (Ephesians 5), a charismatic understanding of authority and power wherein no one person exclusively spoke for God...but anyone could manifest the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12–14), and a fundamental egalitarianism (Galatians 3 and Colossians 3).

Some, such as Ammon Hennacy, have claimed that a “shift” away from Jesus’ practices and teachings of nonviolence, simple living and freedom occurred in the theology of Paul of Tarsus. Hennacy (and others) suggest that Christians should look at returning to pre-“Pauline Christianity”. Personally, if we are discerning in what we attribute to Paul, and seek to understand the complexity of Paul’s context and rhetoric, we can see within Paul’s writings (as a glimpse at the nascent Christianity within the Roman Empire) something like anarchism.

Others point further down the road to the evolving relationship with the State leading to what many call the “Constantinian Shift.” We certainly see within the early centuries of the Church examples of a rejection of imperial religion, economics, and violence. Often, Christians saw themselves as a distinct socio-political reality which, while not necessarily anarchistic, certainly had many similar components.

Beguines and the Beghards were lay orders of women and men in the 12th to 14th centuries. They often lived a monastic lifestyle together without formally taking vows. Communities were autonomous, largely egalitarian, and often challenged class distinctions. They found themselves in trouble with both the Church and the State, since the Beguines and Beghards often did things

¹ from Graeber’s *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, p. 3

according to their own communal discernment. Many influential Beguines believed in an unmediated mystical connection with God, rendering the structures of the Church (and therefore the State) largely inconsequential.

Some Anabaptists (like many Mennonites/Amish/Hutterites) have lived largely autonomously and do not obey the secular government. However, such groups aren't egalitarian and would not call themselves anarchists. In his essay on anarchism for the Encyclopedia Britannica, Peter Kropotkin traces the birth of anarchist thought in Europe to these early Anabaptist communities. After all, traditional Anabaptists often separate themselves from the functions and practices of the State. They usually embrace pacifism. And they sometimes practice communal property.

The Quakers (Society of Friends) are internally organized along anarchist lines. All decisions are made locally and by consensus (which has had a tremendous influence on modern anarchist decision making) and are largely egalitarian. While Quakers don't usually bring such a mindset into a more robust anarchist political theory, Quaker approaches to power and violence has led to significant cross-pollination between Christian Anarchists and Quakers.

The Diggers were a 17th century group of agrarian communists in England. They believed in holding land in common in small egalitarian rural communities. Founder of the movement, Gerrard Winstanley argued in his 1649 pamphlet *Truth Lifting up its Head above Scandals* that power corrupts, that property enslaves, and that freedom is only possible in a society without rulers. They were deeply influenced by the example given in the early chapters of Acts. The Diggers are a fascinating example of how the communist impulses of the early church inspired a communist agrarianism that, in turn, nurtured anarchistic understandings of authority. With the diggers, spirituality shapes economics, which in turn, shapes political understandings.

The Dukhobors were a Russian group of unknown origins (though they probably emerged in the 17th Century). They currently exist primarily in Canada. The Dukhobors reject secular government, Russian Orthodoxy, the supreme authority of Scripture, and the divinity of Jesus. Their spirituality is, like many Quakers, based upon the assumption that true spirituality is unmediated, thus rendering any mediative structures unnecessary.

The Tolstoyans were followers of the philosophical and religious views of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). They put particular emphasis on the Sermon on the Mount and other teachings of Jesus as a guide for life. They self-identified as Christians, though in a departure from some other forms of Christianity, they tend to focus more on the teachings of Jesus as a divinely-guided human rather than the Son of God. They do not participate in, or concern themselves with, governmental and worldly affairs, which they considered immoral and corrupt. Thus, they may be described as anarchists, though not all of them claimed that title. They embraced a deep pacifism—refusing to defend themselves and many were vegetarian or vegan. Tolstoy has had huge influence over Gandhi (and the develop of nonviolence) and European anarchism in general. It is important to note that Kropotkin recognized Christian Anarchism (as developed by Tolstoy) was one of four strands of anarchism in his day (early 1900s). The others being the anarcho-communistis, Proudhonian, and literary-anarchism.

The Catholic Workers (particularly its founders) have honestly found common ground between a relatively “conservative” reading of Scripture and political anarchism. Their way of life has been centered around the practice of the works of mercy, a belief in personalism, and living communally in either houses of hospitality or farming communes. The workers have been

deeply involved in anti-war and anti-nuke resistance and, in recent years, have been active in anti-globalization.

Liberation Theology in general, and the Ecclesial Base Communities in particular were not anarchist per se, but within this movement, there has been a huge reimagining of the authority of Church and of the State. Most liberationists seem to have a clear socialist bent, but there are anarchist sparks here and there. Within the spectrum of practices and understandings there was a push towards democratization in ways that approaches anarchism. Some liberationists drew inspiration from folks like Dorothy Day and Tolstoy, etc. While the influence of Marxist thought has been well researched, little attention has been given to the anarchist influences within Liberation Theology.² Nevertheless, for many Christian anarchists, liberation theology has provided the most fertile intellectual soil for trying to grow a faith that integrates spirituality and political thought.

There are, of course, other groups worth mentioning. Many have been influenced by those movements that touch on an aspect of anarchist thought—like Francis’ approach to wealth, Wesley’s way of organizing small groups of faith and practice, the monastic approach to common life and mutuality, etc. But I hope this overview gives you a taste.

Christian Anarchist Expressions Today

Most Christian Anarchists I’ve met have been conversant with the movements listed. Though, most haven’t emerged from these groups. I’ve met Christian Anarchists who join the Catholic Worker, become Mennonite (like myself), or participate in a Quaker meeting. But, for the most part, contemporary Christian Anarchists emerge out of decidedly mainstream Christian circles and become radicalized towards anarchism.

Many Christian Anarchists in North America were first introduced to anarchistic ideas in the writings of Shane Claiborne or Greg Boyd. Others, perhaps with more intellectual leanings, found their way to Christian Anarchism through reading John Howard Yoder or Stanley Hauerwas or, perhaps, Jaques Ellul. In North America today, the strongest network for Christian Anarchism remains, in my opinion, the Catholic Worker movement. Jesus Radicals has, over the past decade played a modest role in networking and gathering Christian Anarchists (primarily in the United States). Other notable networks or gatherings that have been somewhat friendly to North American Christian Anarchism have been Papa Fest (and through the not-very-networked New Monasticism movement). By all accounts, Christian Anarchism is on the rise. However, it isn’t gathering around a popular figure, organization, or movement. That is, in many ways, how it should be (though more organizing certainly needs to be done).

If possible I think it would be interesting to mention the differences between being anarchist towards government (but not the church i.e. Catholic Worker) and being more anarchist towards the church (but not so much towards government i.e. Quakers). It seems like the first is more focused on the centrality of the church and how scriptures reveals Jesus whereas the latter comes out of a belief in the Holy Spirit’s presence to govern and guide an individual.

² For a rare example, see Linda H. Damico’s *The Anarchist Dimension of Liberation Theology*

Some Reflections

So, what can we learn from this stroll through history? How does it inform our own lives in this season? I welcome your own thoughts, but here are six issues raised in this brief history lesson:

1. Every single one of the groups listed has been considered heretical, in some way, by the dominant religious groups of their time. This may seem like a “no duh,” but if a religious group is dominant, they won’t like anti-authoritarian tendencies among its religious adherents. Given this history, we shouldn’t expect denominations to willingly shift towards anarchism.
2. Many of these groups are “heretical” (or at least flirted with “heresy”) in more than one area. If we are intellectually honest, our anarchist impulses will affect more than simply our view of the government. The anarchist impulse causes us to rethink every relationship, including our relationships with spiritual authority (which may also include the Bible and Jesus). That doesn’t mean we all have to open up the doors of heresy. It is, however, to suggest that the anarchistic impulse doesn’t safely go with every expression of mainstream Christianity.
3. Most radical Christian groups either die out or mainstream. We should try to learn from those groups that still exist but haven’t mainstreamed.
4. You’ll notice a large gap from the early church to the Beguines. There were certainly anarchistic group during that time...and I even has strong suspicions about what they were. However, there isn’t as much information about fringe groups during the centuries when many heresies were suppressed so thoroughly that it is hard to know anything about the groups in question besides the caricatures by their adversaries. This isn’t to say that all such groups were nifty and worthy of emulation. However, we simply do not know how much such groups could inspire us in our own messy efforts to live faithfully in the midst of civilization. While it may seem as though it is unnecessary in our media age, it is important that we pass along our wisdom to the next generations. Even in my lifetime I’ve seen a communication gap between older radicals and folks in my generation (or younger). We need to learn how to share our best insights. We need to become evangelists in ways that subvert efforts at suppression.
5. While some groups influenced later groups, there isn’t a successive chain of radical Christianity. The anarchic impulse isn’t passed down through the ages like a baton. Rather, it emerges. We should marvel and respect the reality that the Spirit of God creates anarchy. We should be open to it wherever it emerges, which isn’t necessarily in the places we’d expect. This, it would seem, requires a posture of openness and hope that, even in the most unlikely of places, life breaks out like a weed sprouting through a crack in a sidewalk.
6. Every group (with the exception of the Tolstoyans) mentioned above had early founders and influencers who were mystics. And though Tolstoy was not a mystic, he did develop a sort of mysticism of nature later in life. In her work the Silent Cry, Dorothee Soelle points to the mystical nature of liberation. We would be wise to ground our anarchism in a real

mysticism—one that embraces a sort of divine wildness that can empower us to love in an unloving world. One that gives us a glimpse of a reality that we can't yet see.

In my next article, I'll offer a brief overview of the anarchic thread in Scripture. From there, I'll offer my thoughts about the tensions between modern "anarchisms" and anarchic Christianity. Finally, I'll offer a constructive proposal that points towards an integrated approach to the anarchic way of Jesus that affirms the best of our traditions that avoids the trap of a simplistic mashup of Christianity and anarchism.

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