

Anarcho-Primitivism vs. Peace Justice and the Christian Left

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2010

In recent years the connections between an anarcho-primitivist critique and the Christian faith have been the focus of numerous gatherings, conferences and discussions. Jesus Radicals has been the on-line center for discussion regarding these connections for nearly six years now, and while the forums were never totally focused on an anarcho-primitivist critique, discussion relating to these ideas has fallen off quite noticeably since the merger with Jesus Manifesto.

With few exceptions, the front page essays have been almost entirely devoid of any explicitly anarchist critique. This reflects a disappointing tendency amongst “radical” Christians to constantly refer back to the principles of the peace and justice movement which have effectively created a homogeneous “Christian Left” devoid of any anarchist analysis. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not looking for a more radical Christian Left, I’m looking for a real break from the Left and all its inherent values such as production and development especially in the scientific and technological fields. The ever-present focus on poverty never seems to go deeper than a Leftist insistence on guilt and reformist measures such as “hospitality.” Sure, hospitality is radical in the right context (the 1930s for example), but when it’s so thoroughly institutionalized as it is in so many Catholic Worker Houses I fail to see how promoting such a response does much more than perpetuate reliance on institutional models for living out the Christian faith. The same could be said for plowshares actions. Maybe the first 100 times you poured blood on the nuke it was really something novel and creative but now, it’s a catholic worker form of institutionalized “resistance.”

For many Christians the peace and justice movement is an easy way to refute the right wing morality and nationalism associated with fundamentalist Christianity. Unfortunately peace and justice Christianity is mired with many of its own faults. Just as the Christian Right has created a theology of personal morality and national allegiance, the Christian Left has created a theology of social morality under the banner of peace and justice. While there have certainly been peace and justice Christians who have attempted to bring anarchism into the discussion, these attempts have been half-assed at best and downright lame in most cases (i.e. Tripp York). Part of the problem seems to lie in the complete lack of familiarity that most peace and justice Christians have with anarchism, especially the contemporary brands such as anarcho-primitivism.

The structural dynamics of technology, for example, go virtually unmentioned upon by most peace and justice Christians who prefer to emphasize more “practical” enemies such as coal companies, the military, and republicans. While this reformist stance is to be expected from unrepentant liberals such as Jim Wallace, it’s altogether astonishing that so many Christians who identify as “anarchist” or even “radical” would keep such staunch attachments to the peace and justice movement. Tom Cornell’s “In Defense of Catholic Worker Anarchism” is perhaps the best example of the terminal lameness associated with peace and justice versions of anarchism and Christianity.

Jacques Ellul came closest to opening up a true exploration of the connections between anarchism and Christianity with his devastating insight into the ever expanding realm of technique. His works draw out the hidden dimensions of technique with a characteristically iconoclastic fervor that made him the enemy of both the Left and Right. In stark contrast, contemporary pseudo-critic of technology Wendell Berry has attained celebrity status in the peace and justice movement while offering nothing more than reformist calls for small-scale agriculture, similar to Michael Pollan.

The post-modern trinity of race, class and gender has been the focus of peace and justice Christianity, not to mention academia, for decades now. Class has always been the favorite of this triad. In its dealings with these issues the Marxist values of peace and justice Christianity reveal themselves. Borrowing much from various Marxist theologians, peace and justice Christianity has emphasized class and economics as the fulcrum around which the Biblical theme of liberation moves. Early church accounts in Acts become rallying cry’s for the redistribution of wealth instead of a more radical move towards the destruction of all economic systems. Similarly, Sabbath economics has become a mantra for peace and justice Christians such as Ched Myers. While there are certainly radical implications inherent in any emphasis on economics/class, the conclusions peace and justice Christianity draws from it are quite reformist and generally right in line with the standard Leftist values of economic reform. The more radical implications of Sabbath point to more than a “just” economic system. If we’re ever going to move beyond the Leftist pitfalls of peace and justice Christianity, a serious critique of origins is in order.

Biblically any discussion of freedom must start with Genesis and end with The Revelation. The stories of liberation which comprise the trajectory of the Judeo-Christian Bible chronicle our wild origins in Eden, the rise of civilization, complicity in it, resistance to it, and ultimately the reclamation of Eden as revealed in the metaphorically loaded “city” of The Revelation. For anarchists freedom has taken different forms throughout history; for some it’s liberation of the ego, for many it’s liberating the factories from the capitalist system. But an increasingly decisive brand of anarchism has taken the pursuit of freedom out of the Leftist emphasis on revolution, technology, progress, and Utopia. An anarcho-primitivist critique lines up with the Genesis myth as an unqualified condemnation of civilization and its origins. Anarcho-primitivism looks to the most simple social structure, band society, as the optimal social structure for human freedom. This is the social structure that is synonymous with egalitarianism as contrasted with the agrarian-based complex social systems of control and hierarchy.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis convey the origins of our alienation and the compulsive urge to limit and control via domestication. Eden is our original context: man and woman living in symbiosis with wild creation, intimately dwelling with all creation in a freedom that seems utopian or other worldly to our domesticated minds. But this freedom isn’t other worldly; it’s the only context that our species knew up until the dawn of domestication 10,000 years ago. This

theme of wild origins and the fall into domestication and civilization is undeniable when we understand Genesis as a myth which explains how we wound up in the midst of the catastrophe we're still dealing with.

Myth is political, and the deepest meanings of these Hebrew myths have been ignored or fundamentally subverted for far too long. Likewise the political weight of metaphor in the Bible seems to be missed almost completely by the absurd emphasis that peace and justice theologians place on Empire. It's as though Empire is the original sin in the minds of theologians who insist on using this word incessantly. Empire is a symptom of a much deeper problem that must be fleshed out if we're going to get beyond the narrow framework of Leftism. But can Leviathan be drawn out with a hook? Perhaps if that hook is metaphor.

Metaphor opens ancient paths to the deeper meanings in these stories, and allows us to engage with them in an intensely personal way. A remarkable thing happens when we start looking at the places in the Bible where encounters with God occur. Our attention shifts away from other-worldly engagements between historic figures and a distant God, to the very place we inhabit, the Earth. We begin to see that the place of inspiration, wild nature, is as much responsible for the Biblical liberation narrative as God's word is. Perhaps there's a connection? When we fully engage with the political force of metaphor in a passage such as Jacob's pronouncement, "this is the gate of heaven", we're left with the profound realization that these stories are not morality tales to be obeyed like mathematical laws. They are invitations to join in this living experience of communion with all creation; an invitation to rewild and join the sisters and brothers who have embraced the struggle for total liberation: the restoration of Eden. Those fiery swords which guard the way back to Eden are shining beacons reminding us not to forget that we cannot escape the inescapable: the Earth is heaven.

But perhaps I've been too dismissive of peace and justice Christianity. "Peace" and "justice" are Biblical terms, after all, and they must have some relevance beyond the stagnant Leftist associations they've taken on. The Hebraic words for "justice" or "righteousness" are "tsedeq" and "tsedaqah", male and female forms of the noun respectively. The words have legal and relational connotations, and can refer to the expectations of a person for God and vice versa. The legal connotations refer to the judicial process (the common Leftist understanding of social justice), but they also refer to the source of justice, God. These words have a significance that hearkens back to the origins of The Fall. Perhaps most interestingly the root of the words "tsedeq" and "tsedaqah" is the word "tsadaq" which means "to make right." This word is used throughout the Book of Job (17 times). It's relevant to note that at the end of Job's quest he has an encounter with wild nature that shows him the justice he was searching for.

Much like justice, the well known Hebrew word for "peace", shalom, has a much deeper meaning than the shallow connotations it's usually given (peace as a time when nations are not at war for example). As a noun, shalom refers to health and completeness. The root of shalom means "to be whole", echoing the emphasis on origins we see with the root word for justice, "to make right." When we meditate on the origins of fragmentation and disharmony from a Biblical perspective we're forced to look at The Fall into civilization chronicled in Genesis. If we're seeking to make things right and whole we need to have a serious understanding of what constitutes wrong and how it can be righted. If the concept of sin is broadened from a narrow emphasis on personal piety to an understanding closer to it's basic meaning, "to miss the mark", perhaps Christians would have a better framework for right and wrong. Within this understanding sin could be seen as that which moves us further away from the original wholeness of creation. Anything

that works to perpetuate the movement away from the original vision of wholeness/peace is not seeking to make things right/just (wildness), and it would therefore be missing the mark (sin), i.e. domestication which leads to full-blown civilization. So we see in the roots of these words a radical call to resist the domesticating progress of civilizing projects.

If Peace and Justice Christianity were to move towards this more Biblical understanding of peace and justice they'd be forced to face up to the fact that these words are only understood in their entirety when placed within the context of origins. An understanding of the original wild creation as peaceful and just would force Christian Leftists to shift their focus away from reformist projects and towards resistance which undercuts the foundations of civilization.

I'll end where I began: anarcho-primitivism is a lens which brings into focus the most radical tenants of the Christian faith. It's not a lifestyle, it's not a political organization, and it doesn't contribute anything to the peace and justice movement. If anything it undercuts that movement and any movement which incorporates the domesticated/civilized values of the Left. Anarcho-primitivism is a critique which aims to examine the roots of our social, political, environmental, and spiritual crisis. If Christians are ever going to address the origins of warfare, poverty, patriarchy, and the destruction of nature then we need to understand that our faith is an invitation to resist the origins of all these horrors. We must address The Fall in its spiritual and material forms. Our faith is nothing if it is not inspired by all that is wild, all that is actively destroying civilization, and all that is bringing the Kingdom down to Earth.

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