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Christian Anarchism

The Revolution of Hope

Graham Cameron

2006

On the first weekend of July 2006 at Poututerangi Marae, Te Puna, Aotearoa New Zealand held it's very first Christian Anarchist conference. People traveled from Perth, Brisbane, Auckland, Hamilton, Wellington, and Tauranga. The hopeful might comment that a mustard seed was sown.

Now the most common question that I am asked is: what is Christian Anarchism? The question is laced with a fair dollop of amusement, or in the case of Challenge Weekly, a national 'Christian' newspaper, (when receiving our conference advertisement) a fair dollop of horror:

Challenge Weekly has guidelines on what we can or cannot publish whether editorial or advertising.... Anarchism is normally associated with anti government behaviour and overseas this often means violence eg skinheads and Nazi sympathizers etc. (C. Mellors, Customer Services, Challenge Weekly; email communication 19 April 2006)

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This particular email response demonstrates a commonly held belief: Christians are not anarchists, and anarchists are not Christians. Indeed, it suggests that for Christians it is an offence by association.

There was, of course, a time when being associated with Jesus of Nazareth was an offense. Such subversives were called atheists because they refused to worship the Emperor. They called themselves Followers of the Way. That all changed when Constantine became the highest profile nominal Christian in the Roman world and made Christianity the preferred religion of the state. This was a significant sea change, and the church has been in a long, slow wrestle with Hell for its soul ever since.

Christian Anarchism is a relatively new name in a long and fertile powerless movement that claims whakapapa to Christ's legacy. This powerless¹ view contends with Christendom, a powerful movement that has presumed its full ownership of Christ's legacy. The most recent demonstration of a powerful church is the driving force of Christendom in the U.S. politics that have put an oppressive American army into Iraq.

This powerless movement has been modeled since the inception of the church, by the underground church in the Roman empire, the Anabaptists, the Amish, the Mennonites, the incredible scope of the 20th Century international inter-faith non-violent writings of Gandhi, Khan, Kagawa, Jones, Andrews, and Tolstoy. Here in Aotearoa it has been modeled by Tohu Kakahi and Te Whiti o Rongomai at Parihaka, by Rua Kenana at Maungapohatu, by Archibald and Hemi Baxter and all their supporters. There have been others as well, making the case that powerlessness is not a new idea.

Christian Anarchism was really only termed 20 years ago by Jacques Ellul, the French theologian and sociologist. Ellul saw

¹ Throughout the article, 'powerless' and 'powerful' are used. They are an attempt to emphasize the juxtaposed and idealized use of power and control in the suggested movements.

no contradiction, but definitely some tensions in the relationship between the political movement anarchism and the faith movement of powerless Christianity:

The only Christian political position consistent with revelation is the negation of power: the radical total refusal of its existence, a fundamental questioning of it, no matter what form it may take. (Ellul 1988:173)

biblical thought leads straight to anarchism... (Ellul 1988:157)

Anarchism is the only answer to the modern state and politics when the milieu and action become technical and order and organisation are imposed... (Ellul 1964:198)

The particular challenge that Christianity poses to anarchism is the anarchist belief in progress. Christianity offers hope that is not predicated on outcome, that is not discouraged should an anarchist society not eventuate. Indeed, Christianity clearly doubts the capacity of humanity to bring about revolution within itself. We have a pessimistic hope.

Yet Ellul's concept of Christian Anarchy is established on the belief that a radical personal and collective revolution is needed to subvert/replace/transform/overthrow(?) the social and political structures and technology that destroy the human person.

Importantly a purely political revolution will not achieve this. Nor is it that Christian social or political action has more meaning in itself. Rather it is that Christian Anarchy is a prophecy, a counter-cultural voice of hope that states that it is the action of God and humans fully realising their God-given potential, which will fundamentally change society.

Based on this theoretical foundation, what is Christian Anarchism in Aotearoa New Zealand? It is my belief that Christian Anarchism today is consciously counter-cultural in that it:

- does not claim to be a theory, but an impulse of humanity
- seeks to create an ethical society free of the assumed 'need' for coercion and domination
- will only move towards that society by the use of ethical strategies and tactics, notable in its commitment to non-violence and personal transformation.
- seeks to disperse power, not seize it, so it can be lived out now as powerful systems crumble.

That ethical society is seen in small communities who intentionally seek in their words and actions:

- the devolution of authority
- the decentralisation of power
- the redistribution of wealth
- to unmask the idolatrous consent to alienated labour
- the conscientization of people
- the constructive criticism and remoulding of technology
- to protect and nurture our brother creation.

Even a cursory perusal of the scriptures shows support for ethical societies, the need to transcend and overthrow abusive systems, and the community as the keystone of human physical and spiritual development. Jesus of Nazareth is the incarnation of those grand themes, and continues to partner with us as we seek to follow his example.

Further, I see that in the South Pacific, Christian Anarchists particularly struggle alongside indigenous peoples as our tūākana to realise their dreams, and as a model for us of community that can be more in balance and harmony with our respective whenua.

My experience of our small community is that Christian Anarchism offers a significant pessimistic hope in a world that is drowning in noise and consumption. Having a view of scripture that sees the immanent and transcendent revolution that has come and is coming, means I can confidently pray "Your Will be done on earth as in heaven." To paraphrase, the revolution is not being televised.

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