

Inbreaking Unkingdom of God

A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 5

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There is a very real temptation, when exploring the intersection of Christianity and anarchism to simply force one category into the other. I see this all the time.

There are those who simply believe that their Christian tradition is so inherently anarchistic that they can simply “claim” anarchism. They trump all other anarchisms in such a way as to dismiss them entirely. There is a danger in this: it creates theological ghettos increasingly unable to respond to current political and spiritual crises. Theological ghettos simply assume that everyone else should be like them while the world and its people continue to rush headlong towards the abyss.

And there are those who see Christianity as a useful tool on one’s journey towards anarchism. They see anti-domination as their true god, and even Christ serves to bring people to this god. The danger of this temptation is that anything sacred becomes scrapped for parts to a cause that will never arrive. The inner transformation necessary for social liberation cannot be obtained simply through structural analysis. There is a reason Marx was never a Marxist. There is a reason why many of my most brilliantly anarchistic friends come off as authoritarian. There is simply more oppressing us than social structures. And more is required for us to embrace our fullest humanity than tearing down oppressive structures and replacing it with our clever utopias.

If one is a Christian anarchist, who largely congregates with other anarchists, then it could easily be understood that one’s Christianity is simply their own flavor of anarchism. And, when the chips come down, anarchism is what it’s all about. Likewise, if one is a Christian anarchist, then one could easily feel that one’s anarchism is simply a political affiliation...and that, being in fellowship with militaristic Capitalist patriotic Christians is more important than seeking liberation. Neither appeal to me.

The best way forward, it seems to me, is to be rooted in the particularity of the story of Jesus and the church. I assume—and I realize this is a big assumption—that Jesus shows us a bold new way to be human. One that not only challenges domination, but also transforms us. It is more than political (but isn’t less than political...it offers real insight in how we live together in communities of practice). But it is also more than spiritual (but it isn’t less than spiritual...it offers real insight in how our hearts can be animated by the Spirit of God). The way of Jesus is integrated; the “unkingdom of God” confronts our political, economic, religious realities. It challenges both the social world and our interior spaces.

A Christian anarchism must be rooted in Jesus’ vision. However, I don’t believe we can really live into that vision without learning from sources outside of the Christian tradition. We can’t bible-study our way past our imaginative impasse. Our tradition is so enmeshed within the story of imperialism that we must be open to external critiques of both imperialism and Christianity.

It is bad enough that our Christianity has fueled imperialism. If the story ended there, we could simply stop contributing to the imperial machine and try to fix things. Christianity not only injected some of its DNA into Empire (thus Christianizing empire), but empire has injected its DNA into Christianity, thus imperializing our Christianity. It is almost impossible to understand how deep the infection goes.

Ours is a faith that has, largely, worked in opposition to its Object. Christendom has, in its imperial journey, cast out much of its anti-imperial core like demons. The Gospel has been rendered Satanic and the Satanic has become the Gospel.

And so, we need to relearn the Way of Jesus. And we need to develop practices to help us in this pedagogical task. If we simply retreat into the safe confines of traditional Christianity, we treat the living Christ as a dead man, one who left us timeless wisdom. Likewise, if we rush into

anarchist critiques without a real sense of the mystical presence of Christ, we are simply tearing down the lego-castle of oppression and using those lego blocks to construct our utopia.

So then, how do we proceed? Do we simply smash together Christianity and Anarchism into some sort of strained mashup? This is a more difficult task than it might seem at first blush. Many Christian anarchists have no real way of putting these two things together in any way that makes sense to them. They simply hold one tradition in each hand, ignoring the conflict they feel until, eventually, they let go of one of them.

I don't think of "Christian anarchism" as one subset of anarchism. Nor do I think of it as a subset of Christianity. Approaching this that way is helpful only to a point—because, in the end, it renders being either Christian or anarchist as an "optional" addition to one's primary identity. We need to resist the temptation to see Christian anarchism as a category of people...or as a faction. Rather, it is perhaps better understood as an interpretation, a way of understanding the "kingdom of God."

Or we may see "Christian anarchism" as a dialogue about the shape of revolutionary practice. This follows the logic of David Graeber in *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, where he suggests, "anarchism has tended to be an ethical discourse about revolutionary practice" rather than a theory-driven endeavor.

The Particularity of Christo-Anarchism

Language will always fail to describe the strange relationship between the Way of Jesus and anarchistic political impulses. There are some real downsides to identifying as a "Christian Anarchist." If one is a Christian anarchist, who largely congregates with other anarchists, then it could easily be understood that one's Christianity is simply their own flavor of anarchism. And, when the chips come down, anarchism is what it's all about. Likewise, if one is a Christian anarchist, then one could easily feel that one's anarchism is simply a political affiliation...and that, being in fellowship with militaristic Capitalist patriotic Christians is more important than seeking liberation.

It is clearly less than ideal, but the language I use to "name" what I'm suggesting is "Christo-anarchism." This language, it seems to me, renders the distinctions blurry enough to maintain the tension without one collapsing into the other. But the "name" isn't as important as the perspective it signifies:

Christo-anarchism refers not only to the insight that Jesus' vision of the Kingdom of God has anarchic (anti-domination) implications, but also the assumption that, only by nurturing practices centered on the presence of the Living Christ, can we move from domination to non-domination, from death to life, from oppression to liberation, and from alienation to love. This is my suggestion of a starting point for thinking about Christo-anarchism. To me, this "definition" (I'm reluctant to call it a definition) addresses several important concerns:

1. It doesn't diminish that there are practical anarchic implications to Jesus' vision. This opens up space to learn from other anarchistic groups and discerningly adopt their practices as an expression of Jesus' vision. This allows us to dialogue and learn from "secular" anarchists in a way that focuses on shared commitments to anti-domination. Working together isn't dependent upon having a shared theology or shared spirituality.

2. It centers practice on the Risen Christ, rather than on abstracted principles gleaned from the text. This places Christo-anarchism clearly into the realm of mystical anarchism, rather than merely “materialist” anarchism (though I realize that it is possible to be both a materialist and a mystic).
3. The emphasis is on nurturing practices. Since most anarchists recognize that our practices today should point to the future we long for (this is called “prefigurative politics”) the practices will help embody a Christo-anarchist politics. However, they would be accessible to other Christians, thus building a bridge with other Christian groups who don’t share our analysis. Much like anarchists contributed to group processes for the Occupy Movement, Christo-anarchists can share practices with the larger Body of Christ even if they don’t affirm the rationale for these practices.
4. The goal here is process and movement, not in an ideological utopia. There is a real tendency to “blueprint” our utopian communities. That is, we use our imaginations to think of an ideal community or approach and then attempt to create it, often stepping on people along the way. Our emphasis should be be transformed as well as transform. To discern together step by step, as we come to learn more and more Jesus’ fresh vision for our communities. It isn’t sufficient to do Biblical hermeneutics, extract principles, and attempt to bring them to life by enforcing them into a community. Our crisis isn’t due to a lack of utopic visions. Nor is it a failure of biblical interpretation. Rather, it is a failure of discernment.¹

Mystical Christo-Anarchist Practices

I’m going to resist the temptation to lay out a string of the usual anarchist practices. I recognized the tendency to “blueprint” our utopian visions. It would be über-lame of me to name that tendency only to proceed to lay out a blueprint. However, I do have some suggestions for practices (perhaps they could be considered meta-practices) that will help us to discern the shape and practice of Christo-anarchism in our own particular contexts.

We need practices that help us learn the way of Jesus, not just practices that help us implement the way of Jesus. It’s not just about doing good in this world. It is part of our imperial training for us to assume that we know what is good...what is best...and to then force the world to conform to that vision. Rather, these practices are about helping us learn...about helping us see the world differently, and then to act in that world in a way that is transformative.² Our most pressing need are practices that help us see the world through a different lense than that of imperial myths and civilizational programming.

¹ Indeed, when Paul issued his challenge to Corinth (1 Cor. 11:29) over the injustices around the Lord’s Supper, the core failure wasn’t simply a lack of analysis. No, he saw it as a failure in “discerning the body of Christ.” One can have the right analysis and still fail to see things for what they are.

² I’m trying to use the word “transform” in the Freirean sense: “[T]he more radical the person is, the more fully he or she enters into reality so that, knowing it better, he or she can transform it. This individual is not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled. This person is not afraid to meet the people or to enter into a dialogue with them. This person does not consider himself or herself the proprietor of history or of all people, or the liberator of the oppressed; but he or she does commit himself or herself, within history, to fight at their side.” – Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

To me, this is a mystical endeavor. Mysticism, as I understand it, is direct encounter with the Divine. It isn't a disembodied experience; it is deeply tangible. In our world, we experience separation—alienation—from God, from one another, from the land beneath our feet. Mysticism isn't an escape from the realities, but it is seeing what is actually real. Any time we experience the demolishing the walls of separation—when we feel the presence of God, when we meaningfully and truly connect with one another in human relationships, when we feel as though we are an integral part of creation along with the trees and the soil and the daffodils and nonhuman animals—it is a mystical moment. To be mystics is to experience reality. And the goal of anarchists of all varieties is to reject that which is unreal—the principalities and powers (the abstract structures that manage creation and humanity)—and to live the way humanity is suppose to live.

I offer, then, these practices as a starting point. They aren't even remotely exhaustive. But I am convinced they are excellent places to begin our journey to see the inbreaking of the unKingdom of God in our midst:

- **We need to tell the stories of the places in which we live from the vantage point of the oppressed.** If we are going to develop practices that show love to one another and the land under our feet, we need to embrace the confessional practice of truth-telling. I live in Minneapolis. It isn't far from the place the Dakota understand to be the source of the Dakota people. Minneapolis began as an occupation. Fort Snelling was built upon what many of us might see as the Dakota "Garden of Eden" in order to break the spirits of a people. It was a staging ground of assaults against the Dakota. Many were forced into camps there and shipped to other places in the U.S. Many died in these camps. There is, of course, much more to this story. But, the more I tell the untold story of this place, the less that the civilizational myths (that Minnesota was born in the mid 1800s as settlers came and made the land productive, eventually creating Minnesota—the 32nd territory to join the United States, etc).
- **We need to honestly tell the story of how we relate to the places in which we live.** If I am going to come to terms with the domination in my own heart, I need to explore my identity in relationship to the place in which I live. This is the only way I can begin to break the "spell" over my imagination that sees myself as an American citizen, or as an individual consumer, or as a thing called a "white man." By telling the stories of our places and telling our own stories, we can work through the layers of conditioning and myth and propaganda and begin, slowly to relate to each other in truth.
- **We need to experiment towards an economy of gift.** Simone Weil believed that money was the single greatest contributing factor in creating uprootedness (the experience of alienation from place, people, and God). As communities, we need to explore different ways of living outside of currency transactions. This is not only a good practice in general (for issues of justice), but it is a mystical practice. The use of money reinforces a great number of myths in our society—it keeps us from seeing things as they are, and instead shapes a worldview that sees relationships as transactional and creation as commodity. As Christians, our gift economy should be rooted in our practice of the Lord's Supper, where we discern the Body and practice jubilee.
- **Silence and Communal Discernment.** The Quakers are onto something important. Spiritual discernment that allows for silence is a beautiful and necessary. Long-time Quakers

will tell you that their communal discernment practices are far from perfect. But they offer a way into a life of discernment. It is important to point out that I'm not simply talking about consensus-based decision making (which is important, to be sure). Rather, I am talking about discernment—about hearing God and one another in a shared space. Decision-making need not be the goal. We need to listen to the Holy Spirit, rather than simply reading about how the Holy Spirit communicated to dead Apostles. In a noisy world of over-information, communal discernment is more essential than ever.

- **Enter into real relationships with the marginalized.** This is the idea behind Segundo Galilea's "integral liberation": Humans are not able to find true compassion, nor create structures of deep transformation, without entering into Jesus' own compassion, which is incarnate in the poor and marginalized. Being "aware" of social injustice doesn't collapse the alienation experienced between human beings. We must nurture real relationships, relatively free from agenda, before we develop strong conclusions around what justice looks like.

This is, of course, an inadequate beginning. But I can only begin with those practices that have helped me see the world differently. They are process-oriented practices that, in and of themselves, aren't particularly utopian (though they are still prefigurative). However, they are practices that can help us discern and develop concreted practices for the places we inhabit.

My hope in this final article was to express a shift. A shift away from seeing Christian Anarchism as a set of beliefs and ideals, as well as a shift away from seeing it as a category or a faction. Rather, I want to see it as a way of interpreting and a set of practices first and foremost. Certainly, likeminded communities are bound to network and organize around common ideals and convictions. This is important and good. But in that networking and organizing, I believe our focus should be on engaging the Living Christ.

As a friend of mine once told me: "All we have to offer the world is the Presence of God." I agree. And I believe that Presence tears down walls of alienation. And that is, in so many important ways, an anarchist project.

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