

Radical Hope

Anarchy, Christianity and the Prophetic Imagination

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Anarchists! For the average “upstanding citizen” the mere mention of the word probably conjures images of crazed revolutionaries in black masks running amok in the streets breaking windows, setting things on fire, and generally wreaking havoc and chaos. At first glance it might boggle the mind to associate anarchy and the Christian faith, especially given the strong relationship often perceived in the United States between the church and the state, even as we celebrate their supposed separation in civil society. Asking what anarchy and Christianity have in common is reminiscent of Tertullian’s famous question about Athens and Jerusalem as he rejected the pagan philosophy in which he had been trained.

Many of the negative images associated with anarchists, however, do not reflect real understanding of the principles of anarchism, which may imitate the practices of the ancient church in surprising ways. Indeed, there are basic aspects of anarchism that can serve not only to illustrate the practices of the early church, but also witness against the church in history in its tendencies to ally with the privileged against the powerless, as well as its all-too-common identification with modern idols such as militarism, capitalism, and nationalism.

Anarchy is a fruitful mode of thinking for Christians, both because of its inherent deconstructive qualities and the ways it urges the church to do better, to be faithful rather than “effective”, to live out the peace of the kingdom instead of depending on politics and police to impose order. An anarchistic understanding of Christianity may be vital for helping the church navigate the waters of the post-democratic world of *Pax Americana*.

Navigating the “Post-” World

The world today is often described in terms of “posts” – postmodern, post-industrial, and so on. There is a certain tiredness in the world of “post-”, as the grand modern attempt to replace a religious understanding of life in the world with “reason” and technology gives way to the disillusioned-yet-hopeful postmodern empire of consumer capitalism enforced by the tyrannical logic of the so-called “free market” and the technological superiority of American weapons. “Post-modernity” turns modernity back in on itself, revealing its vacuity and replacing the pseudo-grandeur of universal rationality with power through propaganda and military might, and yet the hope of some kind of cultural progress (influenced by no small propaganda effort on the part of those who benefit from such hope) still pervades public discourse – a hope whose ground is increasingly based on the fleeting happiness based on the accumulation of certain kinds and quantities of material goods. Not surprisingly, the good or service that will bring true happiness seems just out of grasp, and no consumer product can fill the void within.

This fundamental emptiness is not a new phenomenon, just as 21st century American empire is not itself entirely new. As the Teacher of Ecclesiastes said, “What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there anything of which one can say, “Look! This is something new”? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time.”

This deconstruction is a wonderful tool Christians would do well to wield more effectively, but alone it is not enough. Christians are committed not just to criticizing the world, but to unmasking what is false to enable participation in the New Creation – for as the Apostle Paul has said, “If anyone is in Christ *there is a new creation!* Behold, the new has come; the old has passed away!” (2 Cor. 5:17).

Followers of Jesus must be committed to the reshaping of the world through the Word and the Spirit and pray to see the world as if the New Creation was already, even though it is also not-yet, to uphold the high calling to be ministers of reconciliation and heralds of Jesus, the Messiah, and his not-of-this-world kingdom.

With hearts and minds rooted in God's overarching story of creation, fall, and New Creation, the world is prayerfully deconstructed so it can be reconstituted according to the anticipation of the final, complete restoration. Anarchist critiques of the modern nation-state and capitalism are vital tools that can and should be appropriated to help unmask the oppressions of the world that masquerade as "benevolent" order. Anarchism convicts the world of its violence and injustice, as well as convicting the church of certain ways she has failed to live up to the example of Christ and the apostolic church. I will attempt to construct a framework for the church in conversation with the Old Testament to show how anarchy can aid the prophetic task today. We begin with Ecclesiastes.

Hebel and Empire

"'Meaningless! Meaningless!' Says the Teacher, 'utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless'" (Eccles. 1:2). Likewise in verse 14: "I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind." This is the quintessential text of cynicism in the Bible, but it does not end with despair. The Teacher does not necessarily condemn all activity (or at least not all of them equally!).

For instance, even though wisdom is meaningless, it is still better than ignorance and folly. There is still a time to be born, a time to die, a time to mourn, a time to dance, and so on – life happens, and is a gift from God.

Even the word "meaningless" does not impart the sort of existential angst that seems to be popularly attributed to Ecclesiastes; indeed, it is questionable that "meaningless" is even the best translation. The Hebrew word is *hebel*, which has as its basic meaning "vapor" or "breath". The fundamental issue for the Teacher is not that life is meaningless, but that it is a breath, a vapor, and that folly is trying to take hold of something that is fundamentally dynamic, changing, breathing, something that cannot be grasped, and seize it as something static, concrete, and tangible. If people see themselves and the world in right relation to God then they will receive it and each other as gracious gifts to be loved and honored, and not as "resources" to be seized and exploited.

I suggest that the fundamental folly in Ecclesiastes and the nature of empire are essentially the same, that being an exercise of the will to godlike power over what is given as a gift, trying to seize hold of it and appropriate it for one's own use. Or, in the case of empire, to apprehend people and their lives, cultural creations, and ways of being, subjugating people made in the image of God to an exploited subordinate, a kind of commodity, that exists as an object to be acted on by the structures of power, rather than as human beings in their own right.

Empire and Imagination

Empire, in this analysis, has more to do with processes that facilitate control rather than specific manifestations of empire in history, which often have to do with maintaining dominance

over a large landmass and/or population, though the tendency for empires to gain control over land and people certainly demonstrates the totalizing effectiveness of the imperial processes.

“Empires... guarantee the status quo of privilege and oppression through a centralization of power” (Walsh and Keesmaat, 58). Methods of centralizing power include hegemonic regulation of economic privilege, propaganda and maintaining control of information, promoting an “official story” reinforced by social practices (what might be called “civic religion”), and mobilization of the threat and actual use of violence to maintain the order that benefits those who control police and military forces.

In *The Prophetic Imagination* (Fortress, 1999), Walter Brueggemann identifies three major factors that allow empire to promote the official story in such a way as to minimize dissent. He calls the confluence of these three factors “the Royal Consciousness”. The factors are:

1. “Economics of affluence”, where enough people have enough that they desire to maintain the cycle of events that allows them to maintain or increase their level of affluence even though it may (and often does) come at the expense of others;
2. “Politics of oppression”, an official system that promotes the centralization of power by tactics such as those I mentioned before; and finally,
3. A static “religion of immanence”, which underwrites and legitimates the current oppressive order, where God/the gods/the divine presence/etc. is/are at the rulers’ beck and call. It should be mentioned that this religion need not necessarily be “religious” in nature, such as in the case of the former Soviet Union – officially atheist – where ideology, bureaucracy, and Party politics came together to form what could be considered a quasi-religious system. In imperial Rome, this religion centered around the blessing of the gods and the divine nature of Caesar. In the present-day US the dominant mythology involves the nation as the guarantor of freedom, democracy, and market choice against the forces of “terrorists” and “rogue states”.

These factors are mutually reinforcing and converge to neutralize opposition to the Royal Consciousness. The story of the Royal Consciousness reduces the dynamic flow of history, from past to present to future, to a hegemonic “official story” that asserts the inevitability of the present, given the imperial reckoning of the past, which will flow into a particular kind of future dictated by what has happened and is happening, according to the official story. The past must have resulted in this present world, which will flow into a better future for everyone if people only do what they say is right. They have everything under control, so do your job, go to work, come home, go shopping, watch television, consume, consume, consume. The world that is is the only one that could have been, and the one that will be is the world they say it will be – but the prophetic imagination begs to differ.

The Prophetic Consciousness: Unmasking Empire and Mobilizing Hope

The Prophetic Consciousness, which Brueggemann identifies as the dominant voice in scripture, opposes the Royal Consciousness and calls Israel to remember what God has done. The

prophet speaks in ways that do not square with the “official” voice of the kings. This voice begins with the testimony of Moses against Pharaoh, is carried on in the Hebrew prophets, and continues in Jesus through his engagement with the reality of imperial rule and local collaboration that served to oppress the common Jewish people in Palestine.

If the task of the imperial consciousness is to present a story with no past or future other than what hinges on the present, contingent on the condition of imperial rule, then the prophets mine the past to recover an alternative memory and construct a hopeful vision where present oppression gives way to future liberation. The prophet remembers what God has done, remembers God’s promises, and calls the people to live now in a way that squares with God’s story, not with the “official” story of empire. One could say the prophet engages in a warfare of imaginative symbols against the regime, pitting a counter-cultural reality against reality-as-imposed by the powers.

The prophet has two major tasks in unmasking the royal consciousness: social criticism that takes the form of grief, and imbuing people with a sense of amazement, energizing them to take part in the new world God is creating. Through public grief the prophet symbolically lays the culture to rest, revealing the truth: that what was claimed as “good” is in fact oriented towards death. This deconstruction enables the prophet to remind the people of God’s deeds and promises in history, energizing them to take part in New Creation.

The prophet’s goal is reconciliation and re-humanization both for the oppressed and the oppressors, inviting all to come to the table of God’s fellowship. The prophetic ministry does not only tear down the old order, but presents the hope of God making all things new. While this message likely will resonate with the oppressed more than with the oppressor, those with power are also invited to humble themselves and participate in the new world, “for what shall it profit anyone to gain the whole world, and lose one’s very soul?” (Mark 8:36).

The critiques of anarchists against the modern nation-state and capitalism can provide the church today with resources to critically engage the “Royal Consciousness” promoted by present-day American empire and globalized corporate consumer capitalism. Not only do anarchists provocatively diagnose the problems of violence within the structure of government and economic power relations, but the ways in which anarchists propose organization bear striking resemblance to the early church as portrayed in Acts and so in a sense bear witness against the church for its deep-rooted alliance with power and oppression and its failure to prophetically call the socio-political powers and principalities of the world to submit to the reign of Jesus, for its alignment with power and technological dominance instead of humility in the Spirit.

Anarchy 101: A Very Brief Introduction

Since the term “anarchy” is so loaded with negative connotations, perhaps the best way to begin is to unpack some misconceptions about anarchism. The two major misconceptions are that anarchy means chaos or disorder, and that anarchists are violent. The truth is that anarchism is not a politics of disorder – it is a politics of a different kind of order. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, probably the first person to use the term “anarchist” in the modern sense, is famous for his statement, “Anarchy is order”. He said, “Liberty is the mother, not the daughter, of order.” Proudhon believed that if people could be freed from external tyrannies they would create for themselves a structure in which to live life that would be, on the whole, more free, more just, and more ordered

than that which was imposed by the alliance of government, economic power, and military and police violence. Or, as it has been said, “Anarchy is not chaos, but order without control.”

Anarchism is not about disorder and chaos, it is about creating a different kind of order. Catholic Worker co-founder and personalist/anarchist Peter Maurin often described the goal of the movement as to create a society where it is easier for people to be good.

It is also incorrect to say that anarchists are violent. While it is true that some people associated with anarchism, have used violent means to accomplish their goals (and many supposed accounts of “violent anarchists” are trumped-up media constructs with little relation to reality – for a striking example see *The Miami Model*, a film distributed by CrimethInc), anarchism is fundamentally a philosophy that critiques violence, both systemic and individual. The goal of anarchist politics is to create a less violent world, and even among groups that have used violent tactics the use of such was seen as *fundamentally less violent* than the structures they opposed.

It also must be said that, in this society which often elevates property and profit over people, the destruction of property has often been trumpeted as violence when, according to a more human-centered definition, destruction of property is not (or at least is not always/usually) violent. Some argue there are situations in which property itself is violent, and to destroy it is a liberating act. The debate will not be settled in this paragraph, but it needs to be known that there is a debate, even a vibrant one.

Having said a bit about what anarchism isn’t, now for what it is. As I said above, anarchism is a politics of a different kind of order – that is, a politics based on the principle of decentralized power structures where authority is shared by those who are affected by it. Anarchism has at its root the idea that centralized power structures should be criticized and, if possible, dismantled to allow for the development of more equitable and just structures where every voice is heard and those directly affected by decisions are the ones making them. The way power tends to work according to conventional modern understanding is that it “trickles down” from CEO to boss to worker, or from ruler to official to people, and while those who hold power may give up just enough to pacify those on lower rungs of the ladder, substantial change is rarely effected unless it is particularly in the interest of those on top.

As a result, the overwhelming majority of people, whether they are in a democracy or a dictatorship, have little-to-no control over what laws are made or what policies are put in place. A much smaller segment of the population retains the power to make these decisions and the rest of the people simply have to follow or face the consequences, even if they disagree or the rules don’t make sense.

Although people can vote for the president and senators, it does not necessarily affect the kinds of policies they implement. After the chosen candidate takes office, if one doesn’t like the job s/he does after getting into office, one can’t really do anything about until the next election cycle – a cycle that will likely be heavily influenced by powerful economic entities that are not accountable to the general public, further reducing the actual power people have to truly participate in governing themselves.

Anarchists reject these “pyramid” models of organizing society and its institutions in favor of modes that are decentralized, where people share power more equally, and where no one person or group of people should have the ability to gain too much power over another. Decisions that affect groups of people are made by consensus or other community-based modes of developing legitimate consent, with the direct involvement of those knowingly affected, and not by the imposition of will from those “on top” to those “below”.

The idea of decentralized leadership leads to the concept of direct action. Direct action occurs when people participate directly in decision-making processes or personally get involved in affecting political and social change. So instead of voting for representatives to make decisions on your behalf, as happens in elections, people would have a direct say on the issues that affected them, by participating discussions, getting involved in protest or making different choices. It is not the same as participating in elections or complaining to the Department of Weights and Measures if one gets cheated at the gas pump. Rather, direct action means finding ways to resolve situations through the direct involvement of those affected. Even though it wasn't anarchist, the Civil Rights Movement serves as a prominent example of direct action being utilized to work for larger-scale changes in society.

A corollary of direct action is mutual aid. Mutual aid involves the creation of structures in which people directly help one another in times of need. For a recent example of mutual aid, look at how the Amish community came together after the horrific school shooting. Mutual aid can both take the form of impromptu action in the immediate time of need as well as creating channels for aid to flow in anticipation of needs. Mutual aid can also function as a kind of living critique of modern individual isolation. The early church in Acts 2 and 4 is a quintessential picture of a society based on mutual aid.

Anarchy is not without structure, but structures are decentralized and dynamic. It is not that there are no leaders, but leaders arise in the time of need instead of being appointed as kings and presidents for a specific time not related to the needs of a situation. Decentralized power structures lead to dynamic leadership structures that change as the needs of the group change. For example, the need for a food distribution system to support those participating in direct action may lead to a particular structure being implemented where specific individuals contribute according to their abilities, but this structure would be modified or discarded if it did not meet the group's needs in a future situation.

Anarchy, the State, and Globalized Capitalism

Anarchy comes from the Greek *an-*, meaning “no”, and *archos*, meaning “ruler”. As such, anarchism is a political philosophy that favors having no states in the modern sense of the term. This rejection of the nation-state flows out of the principle of decentralization and the critique of power structures. Anarchist critiques of the state point out that nation-states have historically evolved in such a way as to create long term trends towards the concentration of power in a central entity, in direct contradiction to the principle of decentralized leadership and shared authority. Some anarchists also point out that capitalism has evolved alongside the modern nation-state and, particularly in its corporate form, has been a key component of colonial empires and of reducing the formerly colonial world to essentially a new kind of economic colonial status after their ostensible independence.

In addition, political violence has drastically increased since the advent of the modern nation-state, with more people killed in war in the 20th century than in the previous 5000 years of human history (Wink, 221). The myth of the state as savior is a dismal failure at best, with the rise of the modern state leading to more violence, not less as modern liberal theory had intended (Cavanaugh, 43–46). The state can be defined as a territorially-based entity that is able to successfully mobilize the use of violence to maintain its territory and identity (Giddens, 50–51), and

this is true regardless of whether it is a dictatorship or a so-called democracy. Thus the modern nation-state and violence go hand-in-hand.

Many anarchists are particularly critical of the link between the United States and economic globalization. They point out that those who implement these policies will naturally design them to benefit themselves the most, creating a cycle of power and wealth on the one hand, and disenfranchisement and poverty on the other. This may not be intentional on all counts, but when the legitimate input and consent of all people affected by structural decisions is not sought it is inevitable that one person's progress will come at another's expense.

Furthermore, even a cursory glance at the ties between corporate officials and government positions reveals disturbing intermingling between the government and business interests, which makes it more likely that governments will act in the interests of the economically powerful rather than those whom they govern. Anarchists propose that the elimination of the modern nation-state and the economic tyrannies that accompany it will contribute significantly to the liberation of the people of the world. Decentralizing power structures and making sure the people who make decisions are the ones who live with them, they say, will go a long way towards reducing violence and injustice.

Anarchism and Christianity

Jacques Ellul, in *Anarchy and Christianity* (Eerdmans, 1991), argues that anarchism is the political position that most resembles the Biblical outlook on power and society. The Bible consistently criticizes concentrations of power that oppress people and present the means for liberation in following God, who requires that people love justice just as God loves justice. Ellul defines anarchy as a total rejection of violence.

While he recognizes that anarchists have used violent means, he argues that the use of violence is essentially meeting the state on its own terms, and the state tends to be much more effective at the mobilization of violence than revolutionaries. In addition, Ellul says following Jesus is inherently pacifistic, and the need to be faithful to Christ's example supersedes even pragmatic considerations.

The Jesus Radicals web site says "Anarchism is a rich and powerful critique of modern society that Christians have at our fingertips. We do not wish to confuse Christianity with anarchism but we do believe that when Christianity is lived rightly it looks a lot like anarchism. The two are not the same thing but that does not mean they are mutually exclusive."

The Biblical critique of power is actually quite pervasive throughout the scriptures, which should surprise those who are used to the alignment of faith and power and reading scripture as if it made modern assumptions regarding the relationship of church and society.

Relevant passages include 1 Samuel 8, myriad passages from the Prophets, large chunks of the Gospels (including the seemingly unlikely "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" statement, which should be heard as Jesus saying "This has Caesar's image on it, therefore it comes from him – so you ought to give it back to him, it's meaningless for you!"), 1 Corinthians 7 and its prescribed disobedience to Roman compulsory marriage laws, and even Romans 13, perhaps the passage most likely to be invoked against Christian critiques of the structures of authority.

Regarding the last, let me suggest reading it as an extension of the command to love one's enemy given just prior in Romans 12, while recognizing that in the passage Paul actually takes

jabs at Nero by subverting statements from Roman propaganda. The key example is Paul's statement "the ruler does not bear the sword for nothing," against the contemporary proclamation that Nero was a ruler who engaged in no bloodshed and did not wield the sword (Elliot, 201–203). Paul deconstructs Roman pretensions to peacefulness while following Christ's example of eschewing violence against the oppressors.

Likewise, the Apocalypse of John/Book of Revelation can be read as a document condemning the oppression of Rome and the Jerusalem establishment's collaboration with the Empire that is the example par excellence of prophetic imagination. To get a more detailed sense of the Biblical critique of power, I will examine two passages more closely: the creation in Genesis 1 and the Christ-hymn of New Creation in Colossians 1.

Genesis 1 and Ancient Near Eastern Empires

To understand the Genesis 1 creation as a critique of power, it is essential to understand the world in which it was written¹. To do so, it is effective to read Genesis against the Babylonian creation epic Enuma Elish. From a cross-reading of the two, it is clear that the text is not only setting forth the theological basis for Israel's creation religion, it is attacking the oppressive social structures embodied in Babylonian mythology.

According to the Babylonian mythos, oppression and violence are a natural part of the creation order – as above, the world that is comes from the history of the world as it is told by the imperial mythology. The earth itself is created by violence, as creator god Marduk rips apart the carcass of his defeated enemy, the sea-chaos-goddess-monster Tiamat, and then he creates the human race using the blood of her slain consort to render service to the gods, who were apparently too lazy to work to feed themselves. Creation itself is the result of primordial combat in which the feminine is associated with chaos and rebellion, and must be suppressed.

Genesis has no such violence, not even a hint that anything works contrary to God's will in bringing forth the earth. Even the great sea monsters are presented as a creature in accordance with God's will, not as mortal enemies (especially not as female enemies) to be conquered. Furthermore, instead of using violence against the creation God actually enlists the creation to participate in its own making. In verses 11, 20, and 24 phrases like "Let the water" and "let the land" are in operative force as life springs forth from the creation. The Hebrew construction in these verses implies that God enables creation to take a role in determining its own shape. Thus the work of creation is done with the creation's own participation, rather than being imposed from the divine realm above the earth – an important parallel with anarchistic thinking.

The key to understanding Genesis 1 as a critique of the oppressive Babylonian social structure is in the famous "image of God" verse, Gen. 1:27. In the ancient near east, "image of God" specifically referred to two things: 1) the authorization to exercise rule on God's behalf; and 2) the images one found in an ancient temple as objects for worship, pointing the worshiper to the god represented in the image. Image is representational, and the entire human race is created in God's image.

This was not the case with Babylon. Instead, each year in Babylon they would re-enact the story of Enuma Elish, complete with human sacrifices, with the king taking the place of the god

¹ For a much closer reading of Genesis 1 in the ancient imperial context than I am able to undertake here, see Middleton, J. Richard, *The Liberating Image: Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Brazos, 2005).

on his throne. The implication is clear: the performance of the myth existed to reinforce the social order by which the people exist to serve and provide for the king. The king's conquests in war were presented as the continuation of Marduk's defeat of chaos, and so the myth legitimated the very existence and extension of the imperial order.

This is in strong contrast to Genesis where all human beings are commissioned to represent God and participate in his rule over creation, a rule whose parameters are set by God's allowing the cosmos to participate in determining its own shape. To multiply and fill the earth is to cover the earth with the presence of God (Ansell, 38), living in relational participation with the earth and with each other rather than creating domination systems. Creation is a gift to be developed as an artist her media, not an enemy to be conquered.

The "rule and subdue" command has nothing to do with domination, but rather with reciprocity and living in such a way that humans and creation exist in harmony – for "from dust [we] were made, and to dust [we] shall return" (cf. Gen. 3:19). The power struggle that seems to govern human existence is not part of the created order, but rather due to the failure of human beings to faithfully inhabit the divine presence and engage creation as subject, rather than as object (Middleton and Walsh, 143–171).

The Genesis 1 creation story reflects a potent critique of Babylonian imperial power structures, and as we shall see Paul's Epistle to the Colossians similarly confronts the Roman Empire and even Caesar himself.

Christ and Empire: From the Dominion of Darkness into The Kingdom of the Beloved Son

To begin understanding the social criticism Paul undertakes in Colossians, let me first quote the Christ-hymn of Col. 1:15–20 alongside an ancient inscription giving praise to Caesar.

First:

He [Christ] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

Compared with:

The most divine Caesar... we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things... for when everything was falling [into disorder] and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave to the whole world a new aura; Caesar... the common good Fortune of all... the beginning of life and vitality... All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year... Whereas Providence, which has regulated our whole existence... has brought our life to the

climax of perfection in giving to us Augustus, whom Providence filled with strength for the welfare of men, and who being sent to us and our descendants as Savior, has put an end to war and has set all things in order, and since he has become god-manifest, Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times... in surpassing all the good people who preceded him... and whereas, finally, the birthday of the god (Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of the gospel about him. Therefore let a new age begin from his birth (*Orentis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, 2.458, translation Horsley, 23–24).

The parallels are striking – Caesar was hailed as divine, as the one who restores the creational order, the ultimate peacemaker, the one who fulfills the hopes of earlier times, the god-manifest, and the one who brings a new age into being. To a 1st century Colossian Christian, steeped in this imagery about the magnificence and power of Caesar, the audacity of the claim that Jesus, the one who was crucified as an enemy of Caesar, is in fact the one who makes peace, who is the image of God, who is the agent of the creation and restoration of all things, can hardly be overstated. The unstated implication must ring loud and clear: Jesus is Lord, the one who is all the things Caesar is not. It's probably not a stretch to say that if you're hearing this letter read for the first time in its original setting, at this point you start looking around the room hoping no one is an imperial informer, as this is a direct challenge to the regime!

According to Paul, Caesar's claims are idolatry and blasphemy, and the church owes allegiance not to the usurper, Caesar, but to the true Lord, Christ. It is not insignificant that the earliest Christian creed was "Christ is Lord", echoing the statement of allegiance to Caesar the legion commanders required of newly-conquered peoples. Furthermore, the event that displays Christ's divine glory and brings about the cosmic reconciliation falsely attributed to Caesar is his very crucifixion, the inglorious death that marked him as Caesar's enemy. Jesus, the one crucified as an insurrectionist against Rome, is the one who really embodies all these qualities to which Caesar is at best a pretender. Not only that, but just before the hymn Paul has written "You have been transferred out of the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the beloved son" (Col. 1:13–14). A Christian's political identity is defined by the Kingdom of God through this transfer of citizenship and allegiance.

Christians are to live as citizens of the heavenly kingdom, not as people allied with earthly powers whose authority is largely maintained by violence and economic oppression – as was Caesar's empire, and as are the dominant powers in the world to-day. The ragtag band of Jesus followers is the true sign of God's inbreaking reign of peace and justice in the world, not Caesar's mighty armies or the opulence of the imperial festivals.

Conclusion: The Gospel and the Coming Kingdom

N.T. Wright has argued that even the term "Gospel" itself has two major resonances in the early church: the time of the fulfillment of God's promises in his return to save his people and manifest his reign to the world, and the language of Caesar's empire that proclaimed Caesar's

“salvation” in the language of gospel². From the very beginning the church’s proclamation of Christ as Lord deconstructs human pretensions to lordship and imperial claims of supremacy.

Just as Proudhon said “Property is theft” and so undermined the foundations of capitalist industrialism, the early Christians said “Jesus is Lord” and so undermined the foundations of Roman politics and society. There is no doxology that does not also deny – to say “God is king” is to displace someone else’s claim to kingship; to proclaim the resurrection is the death knell of the “nonhistory” of the imperial regime and the beginning of the new history for those who had been outsiders (Brueggemann, 113). It is not just that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not and people today ought to apply that claim to their situation today, but rather that Jesus is Lord, and that proclamation invokes a counter-cultural existence by its very nature: the Word of the Gospel, that Jesus is Lord and in him the church embodies the kingdom of God in this world and the one to come, inherently entails the rejection of oppressive systems that do not empower people to live faithfully to the Biblical story, rejecting the accumulation of power to live in harmony with creation, with God, with ourselves, and living with others as if they are fully human, created in the image of God.

To follow Jesus means inhabiting an alternate reality, “letting people see their own history in the light of God’s freedom and [God’s] will for justice” (Brueggemann, 116).

The church is therefore called to be a counter-cultural community anticipating the coming fullness of the Kingdom of God, and living in the Spirit according to the way of Jesus, who embodies the kingdom. I believe that calling requires Christians to live in such a way that expresses anarchistic values, and the anarchist critiques of modern society provide the church with potent material to unmask the pretensions of the world. Then she can participate in the New Creation in this world, anticipating the not yet in the already-present, and, in the words of Wendell Berry, “Practice resurrection”.

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² For his fullest exposition of this, see *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress, 1996). For a more popularly-accessible version of the same arguments, see *The Challenge of Jesus* (IVP, 1999). For his development of these ideas in Paul’s letters see *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Eerdmans, 1997) and *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Fortress, 2005).

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Further Reading of Interest

Online archives, blogs, and web sites:

- An Absolution Revolution <http://propheticheretic.wordpress.com>
- Anarchy Archives http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/anarchist_archives/index.html
- Brian Walsh Publications <http://crc.sa.utoronto.ca/articles/index.html>
- CrimethInc <http://www.crimethinc.com>
- Freeganism <http://www.freegan.info>
- Jesus Manifesto <http://www.jesusmanifesto.com>
- Jesus Radicals <http://www.jesusradicals.com>
- Infoshop.org <http://www.infoshop.org>
- Z Communications <http://www.zcommunications.org>

Books:

- Cavanaugh, William T. *Torture and Eucharist*.
- Debord, Guy. *Society of the Spectacle*.
- Eller, Vernard. *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy Over the Powers*.
- Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological Society*.
- Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison*.

- Hennacy, Ammon. The One Man Revolution.
- Maurin, Peter. Easy Essays.
- Milbank, John. Theology and Social Theory.
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- Tolstoy, Leo. The Kingdom of God Is Within You.
- Yoder, John Howard. The Politics of Jesus (2nd ed.)

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Jason Barr

Radical Hope

Anarchy, Christianity and the Prophetic Imagination

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