

Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty

Introduction to a Mormon Anarchist

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*People! No more governments.
Governments! No more prescriptive laws.
Laws! Protection, naturalness, and no more confusions or sophisms.
Such is the triple condition of social regeneration.*
–Rhodakanaty, 1877

Introduction

As we spoke to a Special Collections worker at the BYU Library, another worker—a clean cut young man—overheard our conversation with the elderly woman who was helping us.

“Yes, he was the first Mormon convert in Mexico. He also happened to be an avowed anarchist,” I said.

“What was his name?” butted in the young man, curious.

“Plotino Rhodakanaty,” one of us said.

“Hmm, I served my mission in Mexico, but I’ve never heard of him.” He shrugged and walked away.

The subject of this article holds a prominent position in Mormon, Mexican, and radical history, yet he is virtually unknown to members of the Mormon community. Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty, a Greek immigrant to Mexico, who was a contemporary of Brigham Young and John Taylor, became the first Mormon, the first ordained Elder, and the first branch president in Mexico. Although he eventually left the church, Rhodakanaty is not immediately dismissible as a “weak convert” or one unwilling to make sacrifices. If anything, it was that Rhodakanaty was too dedicated to what he saw as the Gospel and his impatience with Church leaders’ decision not to implement formal United Order-style communitarian settlements in Mexico during that early period that cost the church a dedicated and passionate ally.

Rhodakanaty was also one of the first radical influences on the Mexican labor, agrarian and anarchist-socialist movements. His pamphlet “Cartilla Socialista” was one of the very first socialist tracts in Mexico and outlined a vision for utopian socialist communities. Upon arrival in Mexico, he immediately started a school for peasants and Indians, began the first socialist organization in Mexico (La Social), organized the first workers congresses, and was a passionate advocate for women’s rights.

We hope to provide a brief introduction to this obscure yet important character in Mormon, Mexican, and radical history. We are also interested in briefly exploring what it was about Mormonism that attracted this young radical. We find Rhodakanaty an inspirational figure that embodies the seeming paradoxes of attempting to reconcile religious and political ideas into not only a holistic cosmology, but also a systematic critique of capitalism in ethico-spiritual terms that seeks to provide meaningful and constructive resistance and alternatives to the injustices that system creates.

Early Life and Immigration to Mexico

Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty was born in Athens, Greece on October 14th 1828. His mother was Austrian and his father Greek; both came from comfortable backgrounds. His father was a doctor and writer, but died in combat in the successful Greek war of independence

from the Ottoman Empire. Rhodakanaty then moved to Vienna to live with his mother and her family where he began his studies in Medicine. In 1848, he moved to Berlin to continue his studies, but soon developed a deep love for philosophy. He was particularly fond of Hegel, but read widely. While a student in Berlin, he became involved in politics and traveled to Budapest to participate in an uprising in favor of Hungary's independence, which was brutally suppressed.

In 1850 Rhodakanaty traveled to Paris, where he would stay until 1857, to personally meet one of his favorite writers: French anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon. While in Paris, Rhodakanaty continued his study of philosophy and apparently met several exiles from Mexico who told the young idealist about then Mexican President Ignacio Comonfort's intention to promote colonization by giving land to foreigners willing to settle in Mexico. Excited by the possibility of free land, Rhodakanaty readied himself to travel to Mexico by moving to Spain to learn Spanish. However, in 1857 Comonfort was deposed in the La Reforma wars. Upon hearing the news, Rhodakanaty decided to stay in Spain and continue his study of Spanish. Here he published his first philosophical work, entitled "De la Naturaleza."

Arrival in Mexico and Conversion to Mormonism

Upon receiving word that the La Reforma Wars had ended, in 1861 Rhodakanaty wasted no time departing for Mexico and arrived in Veracruz via steamship in the same year. He immediately headed for the capital, Mexico City. As soon as Rhodakanaty arrived, he began working out his vision. He began by publishing an article entitled "La Cartilla Socialista" which laid out Charles Fourier's program for agrarian socialism. La Cartilla was one of the first socialist tracts published in Mexico and begins by asking:

What is the most elevated and reasonable goal that human intelligence can be devoted to? The achievement of universal association, of individuals and peoples, in order to fulfill the earthly purposes of humanity.

La Cartilla and his writings on Spinoza began to attract a loyal following of budding Mexican radicals including the student Francisco Zalacosta. In 1863, Rhodakanaty and others formed the Socialist Student Group, later called La Social, to spread the message of the abolition of the state, cooperativism, universal brotherhood and equality.

Rhodakanaty then decided to focus his efforts on peasants in the countryside who he believed already had communitarian and socialist tendencies despite their oppression and exploitation by the wealthy land owners. To do this, Rhodakanaty moved to the Chalco region where he founded a school called La Escuela del Rayo y del Socialismo [The School of Light and Socialism] where he taught literacy, organizing skills, and Fourier-Proudhonian anarchist-socialism. Zalacosta soon joined him and they taught together for over two years. In 1867 Rhodakanaty moved back to Mexico City, feeling confident that Zalacosta, and former student Chávez López could continue the school.

Back in Mexico City, Rhodakanaty continued his writing and organizing and began working for an Evangelical Church teaching philosophy and Greek. In 1875 however, he stumbled across sections of The Book of Mormon translated by recent Filipino convert Melitón Gonzalez Trejo and rugged frontiersman Daniel W. Jones. According to Jones's memoirs, Rhodakanaty wrote various letters to him and translating partner Trejo stating emphatically that he had had a vision in which he came to know that the book was the word of God. In one letter dated November

15, 1878 Rhodakanaty proclaims that he had come to know the “truth and purity of the Mormon faith” through reading *The Book of Mormon*.

On December 15, 1878 Rhodakanaty, along with three other adherents to the new faith wrote a letter to Salt Lake requesting that missionaries be sent to Mexico, where apparently under Rhodakanaty’s guidance, there were around 20 members of a discussion group calling themselves Mormons. The letter introduces themselves as a group, that having been convoked to a private meeting in the home belonging to Dr. Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty, Managing promoter of the same Church, for the purpose of organizing a small circle or congregation of religious and social persuasion in this capital city, said gentleman read to us for such purpose a work entitled *Choice Selections from the Book of Mormon*, translated into Spanish by the reverend Elder Meliton G. Trejo and Daniel W. Jones, the mystical and highly transcendent meaning of which was later elucidated to us by the same Doctor, who proved unto us and fully convinced us of the evidence of the divine origin of such a precious book, and of the lofty mission that its doctrine has to accomplish in the world, causing through its entirely providential and divine influence a complete humanitarian palingenesis or transformation in the religious as well as in the moral, social, and political orders.

The letter goes on to state that they saw the Mormon Church as the legitimate successor of the primitive church from the time of Christ, and that the adherents anxiously await receiving the priesthood. The letter concludes,

Will you please, our most worthy Brethren, accede to our just and humble request, through which the entire universe will receive one more proof that our Holy Religion is true because it does not reject the pleading of its fervent proselytes, imparting thus the charity in the grace that it grants to its servants in the faith.

After a brief correspondence with Rhodakanaty, Mormon Church President John Taylor—in hiding from federal Marshals because he was practicing Polygamy—sent a delegation of missionaries who arrived in Vera Cruz on November 14, 1879. James Z. Stewart and Meliton G. Trejo, both seasoned missionaries who spoke Spanish, were called and accompanied by the newly ordained LDS Apostle Moses Thatcher to oversee and dedicate Mexico for the preaching of the Gospel. By the 16th of November, the group had met Rhodakanaty and his Mormon comrades and gained a favorable impression of the group. Thatcher wrote in his journal, “Doctor Plotino Constantino Rhodakanaty was glad to see us, and we immediately had a good impression of his frankness and intelligence.” After four days of intense discussion and exchange, Rhodakanaty and Silviano Arteaga were baptized and confirmed. Four days later, Rhodakanaty and three others were ordained Elders and Rhodakanaty was set apart as the Branch President, or leader of the fledgling congregation.

In 1880, Rhodakanaty helped translate the pamphlet *A Voice of Warning* written by Mormon Apostle Parley P. Pratt. However, Rhodakanaty soon lost patience with Mormon leaders when it became clear that they would not seek to implement United Order-style agrarian communities in Mexico. Rhodakanaty wanted to begin the work of transforming society and for him this meant creating utopian socialist communities. Despite an offer by a prominent Mexican government official close to Moses Thatcher, the Church leadership rejected the proposal for free land for a Mormon colony in Sonora. Had the Church decided to accept, we might be telling a very different story. However, on August 28th of the same year, just nine months after his baptism, Rhodakanaty’s resignation as Branch President was read in sacrament meeting, and Arteaga took his place.

After his resignation from the Church, Rhodakanaty continued his attempts to implement his utopian socialist vision with precious little success. One reason was that the politics of Mexico became increasingly stifling for radicals like Rhodakanaty, who received word that his long time student and colleague Francisco Zalacosta had been assassinated by federal troops. Rhodakanaty had an aversion for violence and a naïve hope that the wealthy would voluntarily transition to the new society he hoped to create. For this reason, the leadership of Mexican radicalism increasingly passed into the hands of younger more volatile men such as former student Chávez López.

Helaman Pratt, who oversaw Mormon missionary efforts in Mexico, visited Rhodakanaty in 1886 with several other members of the church to see if they could reconcile with him. The outcome of this encounter is unknown; however, it appears that Rhodakanaty maintained his position of alienation because he returned to Europe shortly thereafter.

Rhodakanaty's Attraction to Mormonism

Although Rhodakanaty's official tenure in the church lasted only nine months (as far as we know); he was calling himself a Mormon, reading the Book of Mormon and teaching from it as early as 1875. What was it that drew this avowed socialist-anarchist to proclaim that the Mormon Church was "true and pure?"

Most importantly, Rhodakanaty put Christ at the center of his Spinozan pantheist philosophy. For him, socialism had its origins in Christianity and in its ideal form religion was nothing more than "organized charity." Rhodakanaty was critical of doctrines in both Catholicism and Protestantism that justified the rule of the few over the many by threatening predestination on the one hand, or purgatory on the other. Many religions affirmed faith to be enough, but for Rhodakanaty, true Christianity must affirm moral action, just as does the familiar refrain "faith without works is dead." For Rhodakanaty, the only legitimate form of Christianity was the primitive church and he noted that the structure of that church was egalitarian, about which he states "the first Christians [were] in essence totally democratic." For Rhodakanaty the Gospel is a plan of social redemption rooted in the values of equality, solidarity, charity, justice, liberty and brotherly love. A society governed by these values could only be implemented by a pure form of Christianity which did not depend on raw force or coercion.

In Mormonism, Rhodakanaty found a church claiming to resemble this primitive church in structure and ideals; though as Rhodakanaty surely found out, it was not as democratic as he might have hoped. Early Mormon communities were also practicing a form of agrarian socialism, especially during the Cooperative period which lasted roughly between 1850 and Brigham Young's death in 1877. Rhodakanaty had no doubt heard of the communal property, the joint stock companies, the non-competitive values, an emphasis on self-reliance, and the industrious nature of Mormon communities.

The excerpts of The Book of Mormon which Rhodakanaty read most likely described the fate of indigenous peoples of North America, who were believed to be the direct ancestors of the Lamanites in the Book of Mormon. Rhodakanaty had a deep interest in indigenous peoples and wanted to build the New Jerusalem and "see the great Tenochtitlan transfigured in union with the entire globe.

Conclusions and Future Study

Although Rhodakanaty did not become a lasting faithful member of the Mormon community in Mexico, his philosophical sophistication, broad influence in Mexican radical politics and dedication to building a new society modeled on Christian social ethics should lead us to ponder the insights and connections he provides concerning two worlds that are seldom connected: Mormonism and Anarchism. We hope to elucidate some of these insights through a series of future articles in which we will provide more detailed reflections of Rhodakanaty's biography, philosophy, and theology.

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