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A Short History of Religious Anarchism

Kevin Daugherty

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I recently visited my mother's side of the family in Rhode Island. Unlike my father's side, my maternal family is not your usual white, American Protestant family. For example, while having tea after dinner, my grandparents lectured to my mom about communism, and how authoritarianism is why, sometimes, it goes in the wrong direction. My grandfather compared the communistic endeavors of the early church (Acts 2:44, 4:32), and their eventual failure (Acts 5:1-11), to the failed Bolshevik Revolution. What is interesting about my family is that the day before, a preacher in my family, who happens to wear a Jesus fish belt buckle, was quoting David Barton and talking about America being a "Christian nation."

In my family, I have experienced all sides of Christianity. I have experienced the radical discipleship of my grandparents, the cultural Christianity of my mother, and the hyper-nationalist evangelicalism of my aunt and cousins. Many, however, are not as fortunate as I have been. When many experience Christianity, it is in the nationalistic and oppressive form. On one hand, some experience these negative expressions of

religion and stick to them, and perpetuate them. On the other hand, many of the radicals today outright reject Christianity as oppressive and fundamentalist, and then lump religion in general into that category.

I have especially found this trend in anarchist communities who dismiss religious anarchism as some sort of oxymoronic, recent invention. The truth of the matter, however, is that religious anarchism has always been there, right beside secular anarchism, and some anarchists even recognize its religious roots.

While far from complete, the purpose of this post is to provide a summary of the history of religious anarchism. Since we Christian anarchists find ourselves marginalized by both the established church and most anarchists, it is important to realize that we have a long tradition—a foundation—to build from.

There were anarchistic tendencies among certain religious sects, even before the rise of modern anarchism. Two popular secular anarchists—Peter Kropotkin and Rudolf Rocker—both described the anarchistic tendencies in religion and philosophy that predated modern anarchism. Peter Kropotkin outlined a small religious history of anarchism in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article “Anarchism,” and Rudolf Rocker gave a similar history in *Anarchosyndicalism*, specifically in the introductory chapter.

Kropotkin and Rocker’s histories of anarchism offer the same general description of the religious tendencies of the movement. They trace anarchism throughout history to diverse philosophers and religious reformers. They begin with Lao-Tse, the father of the Chinese religion and philosophy Taoism. Then, they trace anarchism through many of the Greek philosophers and to the Gnostics. In fact, Gnosticism typically taught against spiritual beings called “archons,” so it is “anarchistic” in one sense of the word. Finally, Rocker and Kropotkin mention numerous movements in Christianity such as the early church, the Hussites, Peter Chelcicky, early

Anabaptists, Gerrard Winstanley, and the Diggers. Even in the modern anarchist movement, which largely originated with people such as William Godwin and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, one can still find religious anarchists.

Beginning with the nineteenth century, when anarchism really formed a coherent political theory, there were a number of religious anarchist movements. Jewish anarchism, of both secular and religious varieties, became a prominent movement in the 1800s and early 1900s. From the secular side, many famous anarchists such as Emma Goldman, Alexander Berkman, and Noam Chomsky have Jewish roots, but what is of particular interest is religious Jewish anarchism. Within this movement, there was Yehuda Ashlag and Yankev-Meyer Zalkind, both Orthodox rabbis and libertarian communists—the latter being a friend of Rudolf Rocker. Rocker entered into the anarchist movement through the Jewish anarchist community, even though he was not Jewish. On the more mystical side of Jewish anarchism, some have drawn similarities between anarchism and Kabbalah, and Gustav Landauer had an interesting form of messianic anarchism.

The group of most interest to us, and perhaps the largest group of religious anarchists, is the modern Christian anarchist movement. As with other forms of anarchism, Christian anarchism has its roots in the 1800s (though there are anarchistic sects that did exist earlier). Beginning with the United States, Christian anarchism can be traced to Adin Ballou, Lysander Spooner, and some in the Transcendentalist movement—each linked to the Unitarian church. Ballou simply identified as a socialist, but he was a colleague of Tolstoy, and lived in a time when anarchism, Marxism, and others were not entirely separate forms of socialism. I am sure one could also list some parts of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), Mennonites, and other similar traditions.

Perhaps the most famous Christian anarchist from this period of history was Leo Tolstoy. While he did not like to call

himself an anarchist, he did agree with them in everything except for the use of violence (see “On Anarchy”), but this was before pacifist anarchism had gained acceptance. From Tolstoy emerged the Tolstoyan movement, which established Christian anarchist communities all across the globe. Even Gandhi was once a member of a Tolstoyan commune in South Africa, and exchanged letters with Tolstoy himself.

As we moved further into the 1900s, religious anarchism began to change and the effects of this period can be seen today. First, religious anarchism began to develop a strong anarcho-syndicalist flavor. Rudolf Rocker was anarcho-syndicalist, and though not Jewish himself, was closely associated with Jewish anarchism. As for Christian anarchism, Fr. Thomas Hagerty co-founded the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and Bart de Ligt and Dorothy Day developed a pacifist anarchism that was very syndicalist. Through people like de Ligt, Day, Ballou, and Tolstoy, Christian anarchism also became closely linked to pacifist anarchism (or anarcho-pacifism).

Religious anarchism also shifted geographically for most of the twentieth century. Where religious anarchism existed in pockets all across Europe originally, it soon shifted west. Eventually, especially after World War II, religious anarchism had almost entirely retreated across the Atlantic to the United States, with thinkers like Jacques Ellul being one of a few exceptions. It is certainly possible that non-American branches did exist during the post-war era, but the major groups like the Tolstoyans had largely disappeared by this time (after being attacked by the Soviet government). While on the other side of the ocean, the Catholic Worker Movement was strong.

If we move into the latter half of the Cold War, however, one begins to see religious expressions of anarchism becoming stronger again. In the United States, the Catholic Worker continued to be strong, and in Latin America, some expressions of Liberation Theology had anarchistic tendencies. Today, certain

wings of the Zapatistas are inheritors of the anarchistic parts of Liberation Theology.

Today, I think we are having a renaissance of religious anarchism. When it comes to Christian anarchism, the Catholic Workers are still around, and we now have the Jesus Radicals, the South Pacific Christian Anarchists, and other groups. We also have many new books on the subject—where *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* was our only major work for a long time. Christian anarchism also seems to be picking up followers in the historical peace churches (i.e. Quakers, Anabaptist-Mennonites, Brethren, etc.), neo-Anabaptist groups, and New Monastics. It appears to be mostly centered in the United States, but there are also Latin American, European, south Pacific, and numerous other expressions internationally. In addition to Christian anarchism, the neo-pagan community seems to have developed some forms of anarchism, as have Buddhists and Muslims.

This short history of religious anarchism is exactly that—short. It is not to serve as a detailed guide to the anarchistic impulses of religion, but to show that they do in fact exist. For many today, religion is associated with the kind that I see in some parts of my family—one that is purely cultural at best or oppressive at worst. This is very unfortunate. As someone who was exposed to all shades of religion, and has a past with far-left political organizations, I think we are missing out when we create a false dichotomy between radical politics and religion. When faced with oppressive religious institutions or the anti-religious, it is important to have this third way. It is important to know our history so that we have somewhere to stand. We should not see ourselves as marginalized, but rather as part of a long tradition of radical discipleship.