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A Divine Impossibility

A Primer on Christian Anarchism

Mark Van Steenwyk

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2011

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Defining “Christian Anarchism” (or Anarchic Christianity...or Christianarchy...or Christarchy... or Anarchristian...or whatever)

Ok. Given the level of complexity we’re already dealing with, how does one talk about the interplay between these two messy constellations? Stay tuned. In the next article, I’ll briefly trace those historical Christian movements that express an “anarchic impulse.” Then, I’ll offer an overview of a Scriptural trend towards something akin to “anarchism.” Finally, I’ll explore some of the tensions found in trying to relate an “anarchic Christianity” with modern anarchism(s). In the end, I’ll summarize with an exploration on why, from my perspective, it is better to embrace a Christianity that affirms the anarchic trajectory of the Way of Jesus on its own terms than simply to smash together Christianity and Anarchism into some sort of strained mashup. Often, I meet self-described Christian anarchists who 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.

It is important to stress that Christianity has never been monolithic. Orthodoxy has been an attempt at “defining the center”—which, whether you agree with the creeds or not, is a power move that I don’t embrace. I am not going to define Christianity by a particular tradition or set of orthodox principles. Rather, any group that claims Jesus Christ as its primary inspiration, will be, for the purposes of this series, considered “Christian.”

So, while Christianity is usually broken up into three parts by dictionaries (Catholic, Orthodox—not to be confused with “orthodox“, and Protestant), it cannot be so easily explained. Some groups, like the Anabaptists or Quakers, often don’t think of themselves as Protestant at all. Some groups are called “cults” (like the Mormons). Some groups claim to transcend such distinctions (like evangelicals). Some assume they are a part of no denominational tradition (non-denominational churches). Pentecostalism may have roots in Protestantism but is so unique and ubiquitous that it needs to be understood in its own terms. Of course, every single one of the groups I’ve mentioned has its own sub-groups. And of course, there’s always someone who simply says “I don’t believe in labels—I’m just a Christian”—which is essentially a nifty cop-out. An even bigger cop-out comes from those who were spiritually and socially formed in a Christian church and still hold some of those values or beliefs, yet suggest that they don’t call themselves “Christian” at all. All of this is to say that the social construct of “Christianity” is an unmitigated mess! I will say this, however: all of the groups that demonstrate the anarchist impulse stress the importance of ethics.

Generally, Jesus Radicals exists to explore the intersection of Christianity and anarchism. Most people think such a combination is an impossibility (or a delusion). It would be a mistake to suggest that bringing the two together is mere novelty. Most of the negative reactions to such an interplay are based upon misunderstanding. Most folks assume that anarchism is for angry youth who long for chaos and disorder. Other folks assume that Christianity is (and always has been) about domination. Both are unfortunate stereotypes that, while having some basis in reality, are gross over-simplified dismissals (though, in all fairness, it is easier to find evidence for the oppressiveness of Christianity than it is for the chaotic immaturity of anarchism).

Anyone who has called themselves a “Christian” or an “anarchist” for very long can tell you that neither “tradition” is easy to define. Neither is monolithic. And both are profoundly misunderstood. So talking about how they relate is a complicated task. This is why, at every year’s Jesus Radicals conference, we have a “primer” session on Christianity and Anarchism. For the past two years, I’ve participated as a presenter in that primer session. What follows is based upon those primers. Sarah Lynne Gershon helped present the primer at the 2011 conference, so her digital fingerprints can be found in this article as well.

But such a primer doesn’t exist online. I’ve found some that attempt a solid-yet-brief explanation, but none of them seem sufficient. My goal here is to write a short series of essays that one could pass along to (confused) friends.

Defining “Anarchism”

Defining anarchism is intrinsically problematic, but I’ll give it a shot. “An-arch” means contrary to authority or without ruler. So “anarchism” is the name given to a principle or theory of life and practice under which society is conceived

without rule. Specifically, it has been seen as a critique of the “state”, instead promoting a stateless society. That is the basic text-book definition. Most anarchists go further, trying to name those things that oppress or give the state its power and, therefore, seek to reject or undermine other forms of static authority in human relations. Some extend that beyond human relations. Furthermore, in recent years, anarchist organizing has increasingly focused on economic concerns...considering (as folks like Hardt and Negri have pointed out) that there are things more powerful than the state. Hardt and Negri (and others) point out that “empire” is super-national, being driven by international banking and super-corporations. It would be fair to say that anti-capitalism or anti-globalization are as important (or, perhaps, even more important) than being against the state.

At the same time, there are others who call themselves anarchists that embrace free markets. Most anarchists (rightfully) reject such “anarcho-capitalists” as not anarchist at all. After all, anarchist thought largely emerged out of the same soil as Marxism. This only hints at the complexity of defining anarchism...which has led to a number of hyphenated terms like anarcho-feminism, anarcho-syndicalism, anarcho-individualism, post-anarchism, anarcho-primitivism etc. Different flavors represent different understandings of either the roots of oppression, the tactics for resisting oppression, or both. Most of these critiques are not mutually exclusive.

Anarchism is, as a defined idea, a new concept. It is tricky to look into history and name things as being “anarchist.” However, as anthropologist David Graeber writes:

The nineteenth-century “founding figures” (Bakunin, Kropotkin, and Proudhon) did not think of themselves as having invented anything particularly new. The basic principles of anarchism—self-organization, voluntary association, mutual aid—referred to forms of human behavior they assumed to have been around about as long as humanity. The same goes

for the rejection of the state and of all forms of structural violence, inequality, or domination...even the assumption that all these forms are somehow related and reinforce each other. None of it was presented as some startling new doctrine. And in fact it was not: one can find records of people making similar arguments throughout history, despite the fact there is every reason to believe that in most times and places, such opinions were the ones least likely to be written down. We are talking less about a body of theory, then, than about an attitude, or perhaps one might even say a faith: the rejection of certain types of social relations, the confidence that certain others would be much better ones on which to build a livable society, the belief that such a society could actually exist. (from Graeber’s *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, p. 3–4)

This is helpful clarification, I think. And it is the reason you’ll sometimes hear me (or others) refer to “the anarchic impulse” as well as “anarchism.” I think such a term allows one to recognize a familiar posture without anachronistically co-opting past movements (too much). Anarchism tends to be praxis-oriented, rather than theoretically-oriented. It is often pointed out that while Marxism is primarily to be understood as a system of thought, anarchism is most at home in on-the-ground practices. At its best it isn’t theoretically oriented, with all its abstract-thought-ducks lined up in a row, but in an evolving state where thought flows out of experiment and practice.

It would make sense that those who follow Jesus Christ (who presumably want to embody the way of love), would feel drawn to a set of practices and theories that seek to remove oppressive social relations and, instead, seek a new way of relating.

Defining “Christianity”

Christianity is even more difficult to define. It has more adherents, a longer history, and thousands of self-defined sects.