

Tensions

A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 4

Mark Van Steenwyk

2012

Contents

Religion is based upon hierarchy and authority, but anarchists reject such crap.	4
Christianity affirms things like “discipleship” and “submission”, whereas anarchists would reject such concepts.	4
Many (perhaps most) anarchists support the use of revolutionary violence. But most “Christian anarchists” are pacifists.	5
Anarchists are against structures like the State, whereas many who profess “Christian Anarchism” are merely indifferent to the State, advocating a sort of “Two Kingdoms” theology.	6
At least Christians are diverse. Anarchism is young, white, and male.	6

In working through this series (where I've oh-so-briefly explored the complementarity of the way of Jesus and anarchism and the way the anarchic impulse has been expressed in Christian scriptures and history), I've realized a few things. Firstly, so much more work needs to be done. Commenters in earlier parts of this series have rightfully pointed out weak spots in my analysis, neglected historical figures, or unfleshed biblical strands.

Secondly, no matter how sophisticated or compelling one's arguments, people have always (and will always) declare with certainty that anarchism and Christianity are fundamentally incompatible. Let me give a classic example. Someone reposted part one of this series on anarchist-news.org. Predictably, many comments reflected this sentiment:

What's anarchistic with worshipping and serving a man, anyways? Socialist perhaps... fascistic, absolutely.

Many anarchists I know assume that, at best, Christian Anarchists are either anarchists who refuse to let go of their childhood fantasies or Christians who really don't understand anarchism. To be fair, I suspect that their suspicions are correct, more often than not.

Anarchism, particularly as a loose set of principles, doesn't often "play well" with Christianity. For one to be a Christian Anarchist, one would be considered fringe by the vast majority of Christians in history. But one would also be considered fringe by most anarchists as well. After all, "no gods, no masters" is a well-embraced slogan by most anarchists.

According to the Anarchist FAQ:

So there is a minority tradition within anarchism which draws anarchist conclusions from religion. However, as we noted in section A.2.20, most anarchists disagree, arguing that anarchism implies atheism and it is no coincidence that the biblical thought has, historically, been associated with hierarchy and defence of earthly rulers. Thus the vast majority of anarchists have been and are atheists, for "to worship or revere any being, natural or supernatural, will always be a form of self-subjugation and servitude that will give rise to social domination. As [Bookchin] writes: "The moment that human beings fall on their knees before anything that is 'higher' than themselves, hierarchy will have made its first triumph over freedom."

...Clearly, a Christian anarchist would have to be as highly selective as non-anarchist believers when it comes to applying the teachings of the Bible...if non-anarchist believers are to be considered as ignoring the teachings of the Bible by anarchist ones, the same can be said of them by those they attack...

Moreover idea that Christianity is basically anarchism is hard to reconcile with its history. The Bible has been used to defend injustice far more than it has been to combat it. In countries where Churches hold de facto political power, such as in Ireland, in parts of South America, in nineteenth and early twentieth century Spain and so forth, typically anarchists are strongly anti-religious because the Church has the power to suppress dissent and class struggle. Thus the actual role of the Church belies the claim that the Bible is an anarchist text.

Before I dig in, I want to raise, as honestly as possible, some the challenges to the pairing of "Christianity" and "anarchism." I'm not talking about the obvious ones that your gun-toting baptist uncle would tell you. I'm talking about the tensions that arise between Christian and

“secular” anarchists. This isn’t an exhaustive list, so feel free to add more in the comments section. However, they are the ones I hear most often.

Religion is based upon hierarchy and authority, but anarchists reject such crap.

Sure. Some definitions of religion assume a controlling dominant God. Furthermore, most definitions and expressions of religion also assume social structures and hierarchies that most anarchists reject. Christian Anarchists usually get at this in one of two ways: a) They say the anarchist critique doesn’t apply to God and God-ordained systems...that anarchism is only about “man-made” things. b) They suggest that it is possible to hold communally shared spiritual beliefs and practices and stories without affirming social hierarchies and authority (as typically defined).

I fall into that second category. I don’t believe that it makes any sense to say “God is such a big King that he obliterates all other kings...therefore, I’m an anarchist.” Rather, I would say “The way in which God sustains and shapes existence...and calls us to be in deeper relationship is the opposite of how Kings function...therefore, I am an anarchist.” To quote the late Dorothee Soelle:

Obedience presupposes duality: one who speaks and one who listens; one who knows and one who is ignorant; a ruler and ruled ones. Religious groups who broke away from the spirit of dependency and obedience cherish different values such as mutuality and interdependence...The main virtue of an authoritarian religion is obedience...God’s love and righteousness are less important than God’s power...why do people worship a God whose supreme quality is power, not justice; whose interest lies in subjection, not in mutuality; who fears equality?”¹

Jesus is an unking. I worship the one who calls me friend. But I don’t think it would be accurate to say that I “obey” him in the way that servants obey masters. That is just a first step—a metaphor. Just as most green anarchists believe they should respect, cherish, and affirm nature, I am called to worship and love the source of life. Semantics? Not to me.

Christianity affirms things like “discipleship” and “submission”, whereas anarchists would reject such concepts.

But what about the very clear language of discipleship and submission in the New Testament? I’ve already explored the anarchist impulse in the New Testament, so I’m not going to argue about whether or not the New Testament supports social hierarchies (I think some of it does, and some of it doesn’t—but I don’t worship the New Testament...nor do I think my goal in life is to follow the New Testament). Rather, my focus here is how one can be anti-authoritarian and still affirm discipleship and submission.

Let’s tackle submission first. I’m a big fan of mutual submission (all of those one-another statements in the New Testament make it clear that our goal is interdependence and mutuality, not individual freedom). To me, this shouldn’t pose a problem for anarcho-communists or those

¹ from *Beyond Mere Obedience*, xiii-xiv

group who affirm consensus. After all, consensus is simply a structure for mutual submission. To me, mutual submission goes deeper than consensus. Consensus recognizes the value of each voice. But, as the apostle Paul teaches regarding spiritual gifts and mutuality, sometimes we need to submit to the one in our midst who is clearly speaking a spirit-filled word.

Our goal isn't simply to all agree with one another. Rather, it is to discern the Spirit in our midst, and all agree together concerning the way in which the Spirit is moving.

And it is assumed that there are some who are wiser about discerning the Spirit—who have deeper practices in the way of Jesus. These folks are often considered elders and they can mentor folks just starting out in the way of Jesus. This is what discipleship is all about. Is it hierarchical? Perhaps, but if it is, it is a dynamic hierarchy rather than a static one. The goal of discipleship should never be to have permanent leaders. Rather, it should be to recognize wisdom where it is found, and to learn from that wisdom. Even anarchists do that.

Many (perhaps most) anarchists support the use of revolutionary violence. But most “Christian anarchists” are pacifists.

Not all Christian anarchists are pacifists. Just as not all “secular” anarchists reject nonviolence. Nevertheless, Christian anarchists tend towards pacifism. While some traditional groups (like traditional Anabaptists) embrace a meeker pacifism of passive nonresistance, most Christian groups with an anarchic impulse support a more proactive nonviolence. Why? Because Jesus' challenged his followers to love their enemies and “turn the other cheek” when struck. For many (if not most) Christian anarchists, the anarchic vision begins with Jesus' loving mutuality that challenges social divisions and triumphs over the Powers.

Furthermore, many Christian anarchists are inspired by a future vision of shalom free from violence (even violence against non-human animals). And, since many also believe (exemplified, perhaps, by the Quakers) that the Inner Light exists within all people, Christian Anarchism tends to have a hopeful view of God's ability to transform all people.

To many anarchists, these items of faith are foolish distractions that, at best, make Christian anarchists dopey and irrelevant. At worst, Christian anarchists are pawns of oppression (folks like Ward Churchill and Peter Gelderloos have been particularly vocal in rejecting anarcho-pacifism).

To be fair, this tension exists apart from Christian anarchism, though most proponents of nonviolence have been influenced by those great modern figures who were, in turn, influenced by Jesus Christ (such as Tolstoy, Gandhi, and King).

To be honest, I'm not sure I see this tension ever being resolved. Perhaps the best way to live with each other in our shared hopes for a new world is for proponents of nonviolence to remain humble about their critique of revolutionary violence while those who want to utilize a “diversity of tactics” should recognize the wisdom to be learned from nonviolent traditions.

It is also important, I think, to remember that Jesus' teachings aren't the same as Gandhi's. Many Christians have mistakenly assumed that, based upon Jesus' life and teachings, that everything we think of as “violent” is off-limits. When, clearly, Jesus engaged in such things as property destruction, verbal abuse, and civil disobedience. rather than developing an absolutist code, we would be better served by engaging Scripture in the midst of the practice of communal discernment in particular contexts.

Anarchists are against structures like the State, whereas many who profess “Christian Anarchism” are merely indifferent to the State, advocating a sort of “Two Kingdoms” theology.

This is a subtle issue. Many traditional Anabaptists and many neo-Anabaptists hold the view that there are two kingdoms, each of which should be kept totally separate. The idea is that, once you become a Christian, you have nothing to do with the kingdom of the world, since you are now a part of the Kingdom of God. You can't be a soldier or in the government. You shouldn't vote. But, if folks want to be soldiers or in the government or engage in oppression in that “other” kingdom—the kingdom of this world—that is their choice and we should leave them to it. We'll render to God what is God's and let Caesar go about his regular business.

This has led some folks (like Greg Boyd) to conclude that we shouldn't get involved with protesting. Many who have read Boyd and Yoder come to the conclusion that our prophetic witness is in being a Kingdom alternative, not in directly challenging the State (or, perhaps, other structures of oppression?).

I reject this line of thinking, as do many other Christian anarchists. I don't believe that our only witness results in pulling people out of oppressive structures into radical Christian community. I used to think that way, but I've found that you can't create a healthy alternative without also becoming adept at naming and engaging in acts of resistance against systems of oppression. Yes, there is a danger of simply getting sucked into the system with its ways of managing oppression. But if we are too afraid of getting out hands “dirty,” we will simply end up with little farms and urban intentional communities that think they are free from taint, yet still (unwittingly) embodying the oppressiveness found in larger society within their own mini-societies.

At least Christians are diverse. Anarchism is young, white, and male.

I am a white male. And so are a majority of self-described anarchists. However, most self-described Christians are neither white nor male. This is due to a whole host of reasons (having to do with the history of colonialism and the birth of early anarchism). This difference is probably worth a whole series of posts (by someone far better suited for addressing it than I). However, it remains that while Christianity has found ways of sparking liberatory imaginations among marginalized groups in ways that aren't true for anarchists. This isn't because of the superiority of Christianity (history reveals that Christianity has been pretty shitty at undoing oppressions). And it may be because 1 billion people are more likely to nurture pockets of diversity than thousands of anarchists are. Nevertheless, the diversity of Christian expressions provides more opportunities for people of color, older people, and non-males to have a voice.

It is a frequently a challenge to find a place within anarchist circles if you aren't a white male.

When you join Christianity and anarchism, it gets even harder to nurture a safe place. It is like combining the whiteness of anarchism with the heteronormativity and latent patriarchy of Christianity. Which certainly gives us a great deal to work on here, doesn't it?

That's it for now. I've barely scratched the surface. Consider this more of an invitation to dialogue than a definitive article. If you think I've skipped anything important (which I'm sure I have), feel free to add more tensions (and discuss them) in the comments.

The challenge here, I think, is to recognize that it is fair to see Christian anarchism as both a part of the development of early anarchism as well as a unique tradition in its own right. Whether we like it or not, those who embrace Christian anarchism are going to find it difficult to really "fit in" with the mainstream anarchist crowd or with the mainstream Christian crowd.

The temptation is to try to force it. To try to show why our views fit "perfectly" within our theological traditions or to show anarchists how we're just like them (except that we pray). I don't think we should try too hard to fit in at all, rather, we should own our peculiarity and let it become our strength. Let us focus on how we can offer a unique perspective and give flesh to that perspective. Instead of trying to blend in, we should find a way to speak loudly and forge a path that seeks to be faithful to be Jesus in increasingly poignant ways.

In my next post, I'll summarize with an exploration on why, given the history of Christianity and the tensions with other anarchic approaches, it is better to embrace a Christianity that affirms the anarchic trajectory of the Way of Jesus on its own terms than adding "Christian Anarchism" to the pile of various anarchisms.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Mark Van Steenwyk
Tensions
A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 4
2012

Retrieved on March 26, 2025 from <https://www.jesusradicals.com/blog-archives-2005-2017/tensions-a-primer-on-christian-anarchism-part-4>

usa.anarchistlibraries.net