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Embracing God and Rejecting Masters

On Christianity, Anarchism and the State

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Throughout the three years that I have been involved with the annual Anarchism and Christianity conference and the four or so years I have considered myself to be a Christian with anarchist tendencies, I have been challenged on whether or not it is possible for me to exist. One such incident took place during the first conference in 2003, *Powers, Principalities and the Church: Anarchism and Christianity Conference*. The conference was conceived of as a place for dialogue between Christians and Anarchists and for Christians who had similar worldviews to gather together. During the question and answer period for one of the sessions, a woman took the opportunity to express her heartfelt objection to Christians claiming to be anarchist. For her, there were too many irreconcilable differences between anarchism and Christianity for there to be a happy union between the two. I could understand her perspective precisely because there was a time when I also wondered whether Christians could be anarchist.

In his book *Anarchy and Christianity* Jacques Ellul writes, “It is taken for granted that anarchists are hostile to all religions...It is also taken for granted that devout Christians abhor anarchy as a source of disorder and a negation of established authority.”¹ While there are many anarchists and Christians today who think along those lines, there are also an increasing number of people who refuse to let a one-dimensional approach to the subject be the last word. Anarchism and Christianity are so diverse that although there are obviously strains of each that put them at odds with one another, there are also streams of the two that make way for the possibility of common ground. The history of anarchism includes more than Bakunin, Kropotkin and Makhno just as the history of Christianity goes beyond Constantine, Columbus and the Crusaders. Anarchists and Christians share a history that includes Peter Maurin, Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day, Jacques Ellul, Ammon Hennacy and other Christian anarchists.

They tell a story that includes Catholic Workers, liberation theologues, Jesus Radicals and others who embrace faith in God and an anarchist critique of the state, capitalism and other forms of domination. My goal in this paper is not necessarily to seek validation from those who do not believe such reconciliation is possible, but rather to offer some thoughts on a movement that has already been in progress for decades.

One of the major points of contention between anarchists and Christians has been their respective perspectives on God. The anarchist position on God can be summed up in the popular slogan, “No God and no masters.” Mikhail Bakunin presents this view more extensively in his work *God and the State*, in which he writes, “Christians wish God and they wish humanity...regardless of the fatal logic by virtue in which, if God exists...he is necessarily eternal,

¹ Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* (trans. Geoffrey W. Bromley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988. [2] Quoted in Jacques Ellul, *Jesus and Marx: From Gospel to Ideology* (trans. Joyce Main Hanks; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 158.

supreme, absolute master, and, if such a master exists, man is a slave.”^[2] If God is indeed a tyrant as Bakunin asserts then the abolition of God and religion are necessary parts of what it means to be anarchist. Although Christians would not think about God as tyrannical, many do embrace the image of God as Master or Ruler.

This perception of God is one of the reasons they take issue with anarchy, which literally translated means “without a ruler.” The result then appears to be an impasse: as long as Christians believe in God and anarchists reject God’s existence, anarchism and Christianity will only mix as well as oil and water. However, I don’t believe that the obstacle between anarchists and Christians is that anarchism naturally has no room for God or that Christians’ belief in God naturally leads to a rejection of anarchism. Rather, the simplistic representations of God as “All-powerful, the King, the Autocrat, the radical Judge, [and] the Terrible One”² that are held by some anarchists and Christians is at the heart of the problem.

In his chapter “Anarchism and Christianity” in the book *Jesus and Marx*, Ellul writes “The All-Powerful taken as the image of the biblical God is as mistaken as the painting showing God as a bearded old man seated above the clouds.”³ Though there is Biblical evidence to support this view of God, there are other ways to think about God that are also grounded in Scripture. Throughout the Bible, God is not only described as King, God is also identified as Creator, Liberator, Teacher, Healer, Guide, Provider, Protector and Love. By making monarchical language the sole or primary descriptor for who God is, Christians misrepresent the full character of God, who is actively involved in the plight of those suffering from oppression and injustice at the hands of the powerful. The Triune God seeks justice and freedom for creation. This God loves humanity enough to become incarnate in Christ, sacrifice self at the hands of men, reveal the futility of the earthly powers and defeat

² Ibid., 159.

³ Ibid., 160.

them through weakness, not domination or might. It is this fuller understanding of God as the One that walks alongside humanity rather than enslaves them from on high, and invites us to love one another rather than lord power over each other that motivates the Christian anarchist.

For the Christian who is anarchist, rejection of the state, capitalism and all systems of domination that demand our loyalties is a necessary part of choosing to declare allegiance to God. One of the most central scriptures to support this view is found in the Old Testament text, 1 Samuel 8. In it, the newly liberated people of Israel ask the prophet Samuel to approach God and request a king on their behalf. God's response to Samuel during this incident is worth quoting at length:

Now then, listen to their voice; only—you shall solemnly warn them, and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them...These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plow his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but

there will be a tension between those that choose the way of pacifism and nonviolence and those who are open to violence as either a necessary means to revolution or a viable option for self-defense. Even so, I do not think this tension is insurmountable nor do I believe it leaves us at complete odds with one another. The last three years of Christianity and Anarchism conferences have illustrated that there is quite a lot we as anarchists and Christians have in common.

There is an overlap between Christianity and anarchism but the two are not interchangeable. It is for this reason that I have used the term “Christian+anarchist” throughout this piece—there is not a seamless fit between the two and that should be acknowledged. Still, there are many things that we can agree on, such as our rejection of the state and all other masters that seek to dominate us or secure our allegiance. Even if our motivations or understandings of God and the state are embedded in different points-of-view, there is much we can learn from each other and much we can challenge each other on as well. As I said in my opening remarks at the second anarchism and Christianity conference *Engaging the Powers: Anarchism, Christian and Social Change*, “I believe in many instances that [anarchism and Christianity] look a lot like each other when put into good practice. The element that makes this cross-conversation worthwhile is that we also share the vision that social change is possible in the here and now.” There is a vast history of Christians who are anarchist and that history continues to be made even today. May we continue to seek common ground and respect our differences as our work continues.

the Lord will not answer you in that day. —1 Samuel
8:9–19 (NRSV)

The Israelites ask for a king in order to stop injustice within their community, be governed and be protected like other nations. Yet God makes it clear to Samuel and the Israelites that by choosing a king the Israelites have also rejected God and the freedom God provides from oppression, injustice, war and taxation. For Christians who are anarchist this passage points to the problem of earthly rule. In spite of the intentions of those who govern or the hopes of the people who look to them for protection, service and peacemaking, governments are subject to abuse. Even King David, a man after God’s own heart, was not exempt from falling into corruption when he wielded power. Christians who are anarchist take this warning about government seriously and apply it to the present day problem of the nation-state.

1 Samuel 8 also provides a clue to the character of God and God’s leadership, which is important in understanding the Christian+anarchist position. The life that the Israelites will surely have under a king is not the same life they experienced as people of God. Throughout the time that God travels with the Israelites after liberating them from Egypt they are free: free to make the choice to turn away from God and thwart God’s will, or to follow God’s instruction and live as people of God. This point is a small but significant one for the dialogue between Christians and anarchists, many of whom believe that God is controlling everything and everyone in creation like puppets on a string. God does not micro-manage the world. When the people of Israel ask for a king, God allows them to act on their desire even when God clearly disagrees with their decision and forewarns that it is not in their best interest. God, while not controlled by humanity, makes room for human activity even when our actions go against God’s will. When God sought to destroy the city of Sodom and Gomorrah in the book of Genesis, Abraham bargained with God to save the city for the sake of

as little as ten righteous people. When the Israelites worshipped an idol after being liberated from Egypt, Moses reasoned with God and God “changed his mind about the disaster he planned to bring on his people” (Exodus 32:7–14). These are only a few examples to illustrate Ellul’s point that “no matter what God’s power may be, the first aspect of God is never that of absolute Master.”⁴ They also point to an understanding of God that makes it possible for people like me to embrace God as Christians and reject masters as anarchists.

While much more could be said on the nature of God as it relates to anarchism—and I would recommend Ellul’s *Anarchy and Christianity* for further reading on the topic—a discussion of Christ as a significant motivator for a Christian+anarchist rejection of the state, capitalism, violence and injustice, and a belief in the possibility of a new kind of society is also necessary. As the Son of God, Jesus continues in the liberating, healing, teaching, and guiding activities of God. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus not only loosens the spiritual and physical ties that bind people, namely demonic possessions and sicknesses, but also challenges the political, social and cultural elements of society that enslave people as well. Unfortunately the holistic approach of Jesus ministry, which provides much fodder for a Christian+anarchist perspective, is often spiritualized to the point where politics is left out of the picture. Christian teaching throughout history has often focused on an inner relationship with God, personal spiritual well-being, one person’s journey towards or away from heaven. Yet the politics of Jesus that rejects earthly rule and makes him an enemy of the status quo is evident from the time of his birth and present throughout his ministry. It calls us not only to faith but also to works, a symbiotic relationship between our deep love for God and our deep love for our neighbor, enemies and the world that prompts an active response. In short, there are an overwhelming amount of teachings

⁴ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 34.

While there is ample historical evidence to support the use of nonviolence as an effective tool in seeking social change, the “Christian-anarchist’s” rejection of violence is not only a strategic issue. Rather it is also deeply rooted in the person of Christ, who did not commit violence against another, even during the property destruction of His cleansing of the temple. Jesus instructs His followers in the Sermon on the Mount to choose nonviolent responses to their persecutors, which as I see it, serves as a way to shame the oppressor and challenges their attempts to control and cause fear:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, do not resist one who is evil. But if one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also; and if any one would sue you and take your coat, let him have your cloak as well; and if any one forces you to go one mile, go with him two. —Matthew 5:38–41 (Nestle-Aland Greek-English)

Jesus not only teaches the way of nonviolence, He also models it in his own responses to his captors upon his arrest, instructing Peter to put away his sword and healing one of the soldiers who had gotten attacked during the arrest. Jesus, who certainly had the power to annihilate his enemies, chooses to love them instead even when they taunt, torture and crucify Him. The choice to be nonviolent as a Christian+anarchist does not make sense outside of Christ’s crucifixion or His profound triumph through His resurrection. It is the resurrection that gives hope that death is not the last word and that the way we die as Christians is as important as the very struggles we die for. It is easy to see why those who do not share this belief, Christians included, would not understand this reasoning and as such we remain at an impasse. As long as Christians take Jesus’ way of non-violence and the cross seriously,

a choice to define politics in broader ways; to work outside of the system, to find alternatives of which many are possible, to be the Church as evidenced in the life of the earliest disciples and the Early Church who among many other things proclaimed sole allegiance to Christ and were persecuted by religious and government authorities for the sake of their faith.

Much more could be said about the state and the ways in which Jesus' life posed a continuous challenge to its claims to power and about the common ground Christians have found in anarchism. However at this point, I want to address one of the tensions that remain between the two. While I have found many fruitful opportunities for conversation and mutual work between Christians, anarchists and Christian+anarchist the three are not without their differences. One that immediately comes to mind is the issue of violence. Surprisingly, many anarchists and Christians would find that they have much in common when it comes to their approach to violence. Many on both sides would approve of violence, lethal or otherwise, as a legitimate means for self-defense. Even on matters of violence committed on the offensive there would be some agreement. Just as some anarchists believe that violent revolution is necessary to bring the state to its knees, some Christians would agree that it is okay to strike first if a danger is perceived. I have found that conversations on this issue between Christian+anarchist and others have often led to a stalemate. On the issue of violence, it is the Christian+anarchist who often stands as the odd person out. Although not all Christians who espouse anarchism are pacifists almost all that I have met advocate non-violence as their primary strategy and way of life. This tends to be more of a contentious issue between Christian+anarchist and anarchists than even that of the acceptance of God. As a result, I do not think this is an issue that will be resolved easily. Even so, I do think it is worthwhile to shed a bit of light on the reasons some Christian+anarchist have taken a nonviolent stance.

and examples in the New Testament that point to anarchism as a worthwhile option for life in Christ.

Two significant stories that give a foretaste of Christ's relationship to the governing state and religious powers of His time are those of Jesus' flight to Egypt as an infant and His temptation at the start of His ministry. The first story provides an account of the political circumstances surrounding Christ's birth. As the one predicted to be the Messiah, Jesus and his family find themselves escaping to Egypt and living in hiding from King Herod shortly after His birth. As the One who is prophesied to startle the nations and shut the mouth of kings, Jesus is such a threat to Herod's power that Herod orders the massacre of all the male children in Christ's birthplace in a desperate attempt to secure his rule. Even as an infant, Jesus' existence is so threatening to the governing bodies, that Herod goes to great and horrific lengths to end Jesus' life. In the temptation of Jesus, the evil one entices Jesus to, among other things, bow down and worship him in exchange for rule over the kingdoms of the world.

Matthew writes:

Again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. And he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." Then Jesus said to him, "Begone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve." — Matthew 4:8–10 (Nestle-Aland Greek-English)

And from Luke:

And the devil took him up, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world...and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory; for it has

been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. If you then worship me it will be yours. And Jesus answered him, “It is written, “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” —Luke 3:5–9 (Nestle-Aland Greek-English)

Each of these accounts, though slightly different in their telling, makes critical points about the nature of the state and the Christian+anarchist position.

First, being a Christian who is anarchist is ultimately a question of allegiance. If one chooses the path of God—a choice that, as previously noted, is freely made—then the choice must be a complete one. There is no room for allegiance to the state and its claims to legitimacy and the right to violence, its demand for obedience and desire for loyalty from its citizens. Whether society is ruled by a democratic government or an authoritarian regime, there is always the point where a Christian must choose whether to follow the will of God or follow the will of the government. Too often in history Christians have chosen the latter to the detriment of others and Christianity as a whole. For the Christian+anarchist the choice has already been made, which leads to the second point. Both of these accounts are clear in saying that the kingdoms of this world are driven by the authority of powers and principalities that are evil in their essence. It does not matter who is at the helm as all the Old Testament accounts of kingship can attest. There are inherent problems in the working of the state in which the threat of violence and corruption are always present. Admittedly, government is not the only place where violence and corruption are possible. History would quickly show that the Church has carried out its share of abuses. However a closer look would also show that the Church is at its worst when it says, “Yes” to the very temptation that Jesus denies and joins itself at the hip with earthly power. The unique problem of government, as Peter Kropotkin notes is that “the state organization...the instrument for establishing monop-

lies in favour of the ruling minorities, cannot be made to work for the destruction of these monopolies.”⁵ Put differently, those who are interested in the preservation of the state and securing their power, principalities included, will not work for their own demise. For the Christian+anarchist, Jesus’ rejection of this offer for easy, worldwide domination as a means to a new society is also a choice to work outside of the established political powers in “upside-down” ways.

The Sermon on the Mount, which is found in the Gospels, is an important text in understanding the subversive nature of the path Christ chooses and that Christians are called to. Blessed are the peacemakers, the mourning and those persecuted for righteousness’ sake. The meek, not the proud and powerful, shall inherit the earth. Reconciliation, self-sacrifice, and love of enemies are the ways of righteousness. The scope of the Sermon and the breadth of what it requires for the Christian walk cannot be encapsulated in this space. However it can be said that the majority of it cannot be accomplished through the state. The state makes war and calls it peacemaking. It kills its enemies in the name of love for them. Reconciliation and forgiveness is not possible without the attachment of bureaucratic hoops. It consolidates and secures power for itself. It does not suffer from persecution, but instead persecutes its own citizens and those of other nations if doing so meets its agenda. Christians too long have viewed the state as the place where change can be made. “If we just elect a Christian, things will be okay” is presented as the solution to society’s problems. And while I want to be clear in saying that I do not think that Christians who participate in government are necessarily evil, I will say that their sincere efforts for good will be frustrated by the anti-Christian nature of the state’s very being. The Christian+anarchist response is not to give up and do nothing as some suggest. It is

⁵ Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchism.” *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1910. June 23, 2005. <anarchism.jesusradicals.com>