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Approaching the Bible
An anarchistic reading of the Bible (1)
2015

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This post is a continuation of the conversation about anarchism that I have started in this blog in months past—the most recent post was “More thinking about an ‘anarchistic’ Christianity” on December 15, 2014. It’s an introduction to a series of seven or eight posts that give a quick survey of some anarchistically-inclined dynamics in the Bible.

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Contents

Some of the ideas I will test include these:

- The Bible mostly critiques human authority, especially as embodied in large structures such as empires, kingdoms, and religious institutions. There are places where the Bible does celebrate people in power and where the notion of submission to such people is advocated. But I believe these incidents do not fuel the main story line and in fact generally they are refuted even within the story (for example, the treatment of Solomon's kingship in 1 Kings).

- The core content in the Christian Bible comes from the story of Jesus. And this part of the story provides an angle of perception that heightens the anti-authoritarian orientation of the bigger story.

- The Bible from start (Genesis) to finish (Revelation) is political down to the core. It is not giving us a message about preparing to leave this earth and go to heaven. It does not teach an ahistorical Augustinian "city of God" that is our future while we endure this historical "city of man." To the contrary, the Bible is concerned for *this* life and it provides a pretty substantial political philosophy should we be alert to look for it.

This political philosophy, I am suggesting, may well be best understood as being full of anarchistic sensibilities.

So, the authority of the Bible, when read in ways consistent with how it presents itself is anarchistic. It is an authority that requires the participation of the reader—and, actually, the participation of many readers. Its power on its own terms—different from the power that comes from being expropriated by human authoritarian institutions—is power than empowers the reader. It is not power that lends itself to being concentrated in top-down structures but the power that enhances diversity and decentralization.

While many have decried the dynamics loosed by the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century that shattered the institutional unity of western Christianity, partly in the name of Luther's *sola scriptura* (scripture alone is authoritative), the result has been what those tending toward anarchism could claim is a life-giving decentralization of Christianity. The principle that the common reader of the Bible, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, may read the Bible and find direction from it for oneself, while certainly an invitation to disputation and even schism, underwrites the disintegration of Farley's house of authority.

This disintegration, troubling and frightening as many of its consequences have been, nonetheless seems a necessary prerequisite for a development of biblically-oriented Christian faith and practice that actually makes a constructive contribution to healing the world. At least that's how this anarchistically-inclined Christian sees it.

Looking at the story

Over the next several weeks on this blog, I will post a series of short essays surveying the biblical story to highlight ways in which this story reflects an anarchistic sensibility from start to finish. These will be thought experiments more than definitive analyses. The idea is to test the thesis that the Bible, in general, points in an anarchistic direction.

I have become motivated to pursue, as a thought experiment, an anarchistic reading of the Bible, for several reasons. For quite some time, probably going back to my discovery of Christian pacifism now nearly 40 years ago, I have found the Bible to be a great resource for thinking politically. However, it has been rather difficult to find connecting points between biblical politics and our current political landscape. I don't find attempts to link biblical politics with liberal democracy all that attractive; likewise with Marxism. Yet, I also am uneasy with the way numerous, say, "post-liberals" (most notably Stanley Hauerwas) link biblical politics with the institutional church (or is it an idealized "church"?).

But what about anarchism? I can imagine anarchism as a more fruitful philosophical partner than liberal democracy or Marxism. And as more creative and more easily engaged with the entirety of human social life than the institutional (or idealized) church. And I have suspected for some time that the politics most characteristic of the Bible links fairly closely with at least some construals of anarchism, even if anarchists have tended to be quite anti-Christian and Christians anti-anarchist.

At this point, though, I am not as prepared to discuss anarchism itself as I am to think about a general anarchistic sensibility in relation to the Bible. So my definition of anarchism is purposely quite broad and simple. I am thinking of anarchism as having two main components, a negative one and a positive one. The negative one is a suspicion of authority, especially in relation to the state (though I think an anarchistic sensibility should be just as suspicious of corporate power and the power of other large institutions). This leads to a de-centering of the state as the basic instrument of human political life. The positive component is the affirmation of human possibilities to self-organize, to manage our affairs in decentralized, self-managed communities.

At this point, I am not so interested in refining that definition, nor in debating how "realistic" it is in actual life. My interest right now is simply in looking at the Bible with this sensibility

in mind and paying attention to ways the Bible shares it (and doesn't share it). Or, I should say, how parts of the Bible do or don't—acknowledging that there certainly isn't just one "biblical sensibility."

What kind of book?

On the one hand, the Christian Bible is a collection of widely disparate writings—spanning close to 1,000 years from the earliest to the latest books, numerous social and political settings, various genres of literature, and two main languages. It is clearly a human book, its separate pieces written as occasional statements that address specific issues and settings.

On the other hand, the Bible as a collection of writings is the master story for Christians. It is assumed to have, on some level, a meaningful coherence that allows it to be used as sacred scripture. Some parts are seen as more clear and definitive than others, but as a rule Christians think of the authority of the Bible involving all of its parts.

How the Bible works as an authority is a complicated and contested issue. One general approach, that stands in profound tension with an anarchistic sensibility, it to approach the Bible as the source of absolute truths that simply need to be heard and followed ("the Bible says it, I believe it, and that settles it"). In this view, though, the Bible never actually stands alone as an authority. Theologian Edward Farley has developed a critique of what he calls "the house of authority" which requires three authoritative presences: the Bible as the revealed truth from God, official doctrinal statements (creeds, confessions, etc.) that provide definitive interpretations of the Bible, and institutions of authority that enforce the official interpretations (See his book *Ecclesial Reflections*). In light of this analysis, we can see why biblical authority is a problem

for an anarchistic sensibility—it is tied in with centralized *human* authority (often centralized human *authoritarianism*).

However, I suggest that though a house of authority type of approach to the Bible is by definition deeply problematic (and if the Bible itself calls for such an approach, the Bible's authority should be denied), it actually is not true to the Bible's own self-presentation. The Bible actually presents itself as a very *non-authoritarian* collection of writings.

The biblical style of authority

When one simply picks up the Bible and reads from it, likely one will be struck by what we could call an epistemological humility. The Bible makes few claims for its own truthfulness. It mainly just gives us a bunch of stories that upon reading together, numerous times, does seem to have a kind of coherence. But the coherence is more suggestive than explicitly asserted. And in its weak coherence, the Bible's message is invitational. The reader can choose to enter the story or not.

The characters in the Bible are quite human—sometimes strikingly so. Heroes such as Abraham, Moses, David, and Paul have feet of clay. Even the greatest of the heroes, Jesus, comes across as gentle, respectful, and compassionate. And, if one looks for it, one can see an on-going conversation within the Bible where different points of view challenge each other.

Beyond the internal dynamics that humanize the Bible and present a non-authoritarian kind of authority, we need also to recognize that the humanness of the text for us is reinforced by the fact that what we have in our English Bibles are translations made by human beings from ancient languages that at best provide us with what has been called "dynamic equivalence" where the translators can do no better than approximate the meanings of the original.