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The anarchistic appeal of the Bible

A needed story for human wellbeing

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2021

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main responsibility for such failures generally lies with the powers-that-be in the community and with the impact of the great empires on the people (from Egypt to Rome). Human nature is not the problem so much as the imposition of power politics from the top down.

Christian theology for most of its history has been shaped by leaders and institutions that have been friendly to the top of the power pyramid in the various Christendoms since the fourth century. The powerful people have benefited when the church has a theology of original sin and deference to church and political leaders. Such theology has much less grounding in the Bible than has generally been recognized. The Bible, as a whole, undermines the domination of hierarchies in human communities. Do not be like the tyrants of the nations, Jesus insisted.

We have a key task in our day if we hope to influence Christianity to be part of the solution to our social crises (rather than part of the problem, as has generally been the case). That is to recover the radical politics of the Bible. And one way to strengthen that recovery will be to draw from traditions of anarchistic politics.

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However, crucially, the end of the territorial kingdom did not mean the end of the peoplehood or the vocation. The story tells how after the territorial kingdom was established the people gradually turned from Torah, leading to empire-like practices by kings and the power elite. At the last minute of this kingdom's existence, the law books were rediscovered. With Torah back in hand, the community managed to find sustenance for their peoplehood. They didn't need a king nor a territorial kingdom to witness to the truth of Torah and to bless all the families of the earth. The political message of the Old Testament thus ends up being an affirmation of peoplehood and politics apart from existing as a territorial kingdom.

Making sense of New Testament politics

With that anti-territorial kingdom message in mind, the political dynamics of the New Testament make more sense—and it's easier to see continuity between the two testaments. Jesus framed his ministry as an expression of the kingdom of God. But it was not a territorial kingdom that would imitate the ways of empire. The politics of the kingdom of God as presented by Jesus (and affirmed by later New Testament witnesses) has to do with embodying Torah in decentralized, shalom-focused “assemblies” (*ekklesia* = churches). The common life and witness of these assemblies was about politics in the same ways that the original Torah-centered community following the exodus was—practice generosity, justice for the vulnerable, non-acquisitive economics, no centralized power elite, reconciliation rather than retaliation when there is conflict.

And this kind of politics is pretty anarchistic. Both testaments show a fairly high level of optimism about the human potential to follow the dictates of Torah and its guidance for community that especially empowers its vulnerable people. Certainly, we read of many failures to embody the way of Torah consistently, but the

living. They end up with a homeland, gained with ambiguous means. What's not ambiguous is that in time, this territorial kingdom departs from Torah's guidance for just living. As the kings and power elite do imitate the ways of empire and exploit the vulnerable, prophets arise who reemphasize the perennial relevance of Torah and the politics of decentralized power and empowered self-determination.

So, the relevance of Torah is multifaceted, in many ways hinting at an anarchistic sensibility—especially in its critique of centralized power, its attention to the needs of the vulnerable, its providing guidance for shared power in the community, and its empowerment of the prophets as a source of insight and direction from leaders outside the elite establishment.

The political dimensions of the New Testament have often been interpreted to be in tension with the Old Testament. Most commonly, perhaps, the New Testament has been read to be focused more on “spiritual” dimensions of life with little political guidance to be found. However, it is possible to read the New Testament as being much more in continuity with the Old Testament. We will do so when we recognize how central to the Old Testament story is the *failure* of the territorial kingdom to work as the locus for God's work among human beings.

The Hebrews, the story goes, were given the Land as a place to embody Torah and fulfill their vocation to bless all the families of the earth. For various reasons, they failed to do so. The leadership class became corrupt and Torah was disregarded. Ultimately, the territorial kingdoms were destroyed by a couple of the great empires, Assyria and Babylon. The key message of this tragic story, though, was that the destruction of the territorial kingdoms was not actually a defeat for Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews. This destruction was actually a *vindication* of Torah and of the warning God gave the people back when they entered the Land in the time of Joshua: Disregard Torah and your kingdom will fall.

I would say that I got politicized in the mid-1970s, about the time I finished college. I grew up paying attention to the news. My dad was a high school social studies teacher, so keeping up on current affairs was part of his job—and that spilled over to me, too. However, when I started college in 1972, I was pretty apolitical. My Christian conversion when I was 17 had actually influenced me to pay less attention to politics.

Radical Christianity and politics

Still, these were turbulent times. I remember that terrible spring and summer of 1968 when Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy both were assassinated, and so much else was deeply chaotic. I registered for the draft when I was 18 in 1972 and thought it likely that I would have to go to Vietnam. I'm sure I was paying more attention than I remember, and within a few years I was highly engaged. The key factor for me, it turned out, was my exposure to the “radical evangelical Christians” affiliated with several magazines—*The Other Side* on the East Coast, *Post American* in the Midwest (then *Sojourners* when the community moved to DC), and *Radix* out West. Just as fundamentalist Christianity depoliticized me in the early 1970s, radical evangelical Christianity had the opposite effect a few years later.

I would read each of those magazines as soon as possible when it arrived. After voting for Richard Nixon in 1972, I grudgingly voted for Jimmy Carter in 1976—grudging because I thought he was too conservative, especially too pro-military, but preferable to Gerald Ford. Carter proved my fears well-founded, and by 1980 I was ready to go third party. One of Carter's acts that got my wife Kathleen and me on the streets was his reinitiating registration for the draft. We joined the protests and met another young couple who introduced us to a political philosophy of which we had been ignorant.

Karl and Linda were young radicals who had recently moved to Eugene, Oregon, where we lived at the time. They moved specifically to join with an emerging community of anarchists. We had numerous lengthy conversations with them about anarchism, Christian pacifism, nonviolent resistance, violent resistance, and other related issues. Karl and, especially, Linda were smart, compassionate, deeply committed to social justice, and thoroughly against war.

We discovered the appeal of anarchism. For Kathleen and me, the path toward anarchism had mostly to do with war. Centralized, territorial nation-states have become a curse. The 20th century was the century of mass war and was showing little signs of changing. In 1980, a rising tide of opposition to nuclear weapons was heightening awareness of the link between centralized government, large corporations, and the likelihood of the destruction of the earth.

Kathleen and I weren't ready to go full anarchist, largely because of our commitment to working in the church. When the anti-draft movement petered out, we lost touch with Karl and Linda and our interest in anarchism moved to the back burner. We certainly didn't get any encouragement to pursue it from the Mennonites we were by then hanging out with.

Nonetheless, ever since those discussions I have pretty much thought of myself as an anarchist sympathizer or as an anarchistic pacifist or something of that sort. I turned toward church work and theological writing and teaching and never actually became deeply immersed in politics—remaining always on the edge as an observer and theorist.

I did do a bit of reading back in the late 1970s and early 1980s that reinforced my anarchistic inclinations. George Woodcock's history of anarchism a useful overview. I took a graduate seminar on the history of political thought that had a sympathetic unit on anarchism. I immersed myself deeply in the writings of Christian social thinker Jacques Ellul, who was inclined toward anarchism and whose critique of technology included sharp opposition to centralized power. E.F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful* didn't re-

cludes both a critique of centralized, unjust power and a vision for an alternative community of freed slaves, an alternative vision for human life.

Empowerment for the vulnerable

By paying special attention to the wellbeing of the vulnerable people in the community, even including the "resident alien" who was not a full member of the community, Torah puts flesh on the founding dynamic in Israel. The community is made up of freed slaves and is meant to operate in a way that prevents a return to slavery. The anti-slavery dynamics of Torah include both a rejection of centralized power (initially, no human king and no permanent military; when allowance for the possibility of human kingship is made, precautions are still provided to prevent aggrandizement of power and wealth) and an affirmation of the center of power being the community and not some kind of small elite.

Along with Egypt, later empires are also critiqued throughout the Bible. Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Rome are all, more or less, presented as God's enemies, as oppressors of the Hebrew people (and so many others), and as the sources of most of the world's violence and injustice. The entire project of the exodus, Torah, and the sustenance of the community of God's people is framed from the beginning in terms of God's work of blessing all the families of the earth. Resistance to power politics is one of the main aspects of this work, along with constructing communities that model genuine justice, that empower the vulnerable, and that practice the virtues of generosity, compassion, and sustainable relationships with nature.

One of the most politically significant parts of the Bible's story is the account of the post-exodus Hebrew community. Though gifted with Torah as guidance to just living, the community struggles from the beginning with actually embodying such just

man fallenness, of imperfect communities, of power politics. The tension between the imperfect and the ideal remains very much in place.

Reading the Bible in light of key anarchistic views

Let me sketch an outline of the Bible's political story framed in terms of the two key pillars of an anarchistic sensibility: (1) suspicion of centralized power and (2) affirmation of human possibilities for self-determination.

From the start, the story expresses a deep suspicion of centralized political power. At first it is a bit subtle. Only if we notice what is missing in the creation story will we recognize its subversive tenor. The creative force and center of power in the universe is not anything hinting of human kingship or empires. It is a free, humane, relational God whose creative energies stem from love not domination. The human politics of Genesis are local, decentralized, and familial with many surprises. Younger sons at times take priority. Injustices at times are forgiven. The God at times sides with the weaker and more vulnerable members of the community.

The Bible's second book makes the anti-imperial sensibility of the Bible overt. The paragon of power politics, the god-emperor Pharaoh of Egypt is shown to be corrupt and overtly opposed to the God of the Hebrews (that is, according to the story, the God who is the Creator of the Universe—so this is a cosmological statement). God intervenes to liberate the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and gifts them with a blueprint for a just and humane society—the law codes (Torah). Torah certainly contains many ambiguities and reflects its own time and place of origin. However, as a whole, it may fruitfully be read as an exercise in anti-imperial politics. The vision of communal life in Torah is a counter-vision to the notion of life expressed in Egypt's ways of domination. So, the exodus story in-

fer to anarchism overtly but it presented a pretty anarchistic sense of "economics as if people matter."

However, my main focus in those days—and ever since—has been on the Bible and theology and their relevance for our social ethics. As I look back now, I don't understand why I didn't sense a stronger connection between what I was learning about the Bible and the core ideas of the anarchists. A central biblical theme that I encountered came from my Mennonite seminary Old Testament professor, Millard Lind. Lind taught a class on the "theology of warfare in the Old Testament." A big part of his argument was how from the beginning the Old Testament story told of an alternative to the "power politics" of the great empires that surrounded the Hebrews. The Old Testament law codes actually presented an alternative politics centered on God's compassion and restorative justice as opposed to the self-interests of kings and the power elites. I don't know why I didn't make a stronger connection between Lind's "theo-politics" and anarchistic ideas.

From my New Testament professors, I got similar ideas about the contrast between the political stance that Jesus and his followers embodied and the politics of the Roman Empire. I suspect that the traditional Mennonite inclination to avoid "worldly politics" contributed to a lack of interest in finding "secular" political traditions that would dovetail with the new understandings many biblical scholars and other theologians were gaining of biblical politics.

A new story for human wellbeing

Those two movements that caught my attention in the late 1970s—anarchism and biblical radicalism—both gained traction in response to the crises of the times. The aftershocks of the Vietnam War, growing environmental crises, the heightening threat of nuclear war, the disintegrating of the Civil Rights Movement, among numerous other issues, pushed people influenced by the

ferment of the 1960s to find ways to create a new story for human wellbeing.

Looking back, though the late 1970s saw plenty of significant injustices, I also have a sense that it was the end of what almost seems like a golden age of equality and peaceableness—perhaps related to the social movements of the 1960s. The environment has deteriorated much more leading to our present climate crises. American warism is more unrestrained than ever. The emergence of the prison-industrial complex and its partner, untrammelled police brutality, was only getting started in the late 1970s (the American rate of imprisonment increased by seven times between 1970 and 2010). The Republican Party's alliance with anti-Democratic corporate capitalism and the white supremacist Christian Right was just getting underway with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and has gotten so out of control since then that we ended up with Donald Trump.

So, if we could have used a mutually empowering encounter of the new awareness of the Bible's radical politics as seen on the evangelical left with the emergent interest in anarchism back in the 1970s—an encounter that did not happen as far as I ever knew—we certainly can use it more than ever now.

It is now time, perhaps, to pull together some insights from anarchist traditions with insights from the Bible's radical politics. For me, the appeal of the anarchist strain of political thought and action is that it offers a this-worldly political expression that catches up some of the key elements of the biblical story—such as a vision of human potential for self-determination that remains deeply suspicious of centralized states and other mega-structures. Another link between an anarchistic sensibility and the Bible's radical politics is a priority on kindness, generosity, mercy, and forgiveness as dispositions that take priority over nation-states' demands on our loyalty that involve violating other human beings' peace and wellbeing.

The Bible's “anarchistic” politics

I will seek to flesh out the Bible's “anarchistic” politics. What I mean by “anarchistic politics” I would boil down to two key points: (1) A deep suspicion of centralized, top-down power and (2) an affirmation of the human potential for self-determination and humane small-scale social organizing. These two points may be seen as “political” in how they shape ways human beings think about how we order our lives together. When we retain a strong sense of suspicion of centralized power and an affirmation of self-determination, we can apply these insights to human social life on all levels—families, workplaces, schools, faith communities, neighborhoods, towns and cities, states, nations, and beyond.

We may think about politics in two senses—and I suggest we seek to keep both in mind as we proceed. The first sense is to think of the *ideal*—what is the vision in the Bible for the healthy, humane community, what we could call its intention for humanity? What do we aspire to? What are the hopes that we seek to fulfill? What are the standards of discernment that we measure our efforts by (recognizing that these standards always remain only partially met)?

The second sense is what we might call “real world politics”: What is possible? What are the necessary compromises? How do we balance the various interests of a diverse world? What are the power dynamics that shape and limit our politics?

I believe that Bible speaks to both of these senses of politics. We should always keep in mind *both* of them—tempering our ideals by what is possible in the short run in a pluralistic environment *and* always seeking to move toward the full shalom of the beloved community and never resting content with brokenness and injustice. The Bible does provide much material for idealistic hopes, and we should take that material quite seriously. One of the main functions of the Bible is to hold before us a vision of genuine healing and shalom. At the same time, the Bible does give us pictures of hu-