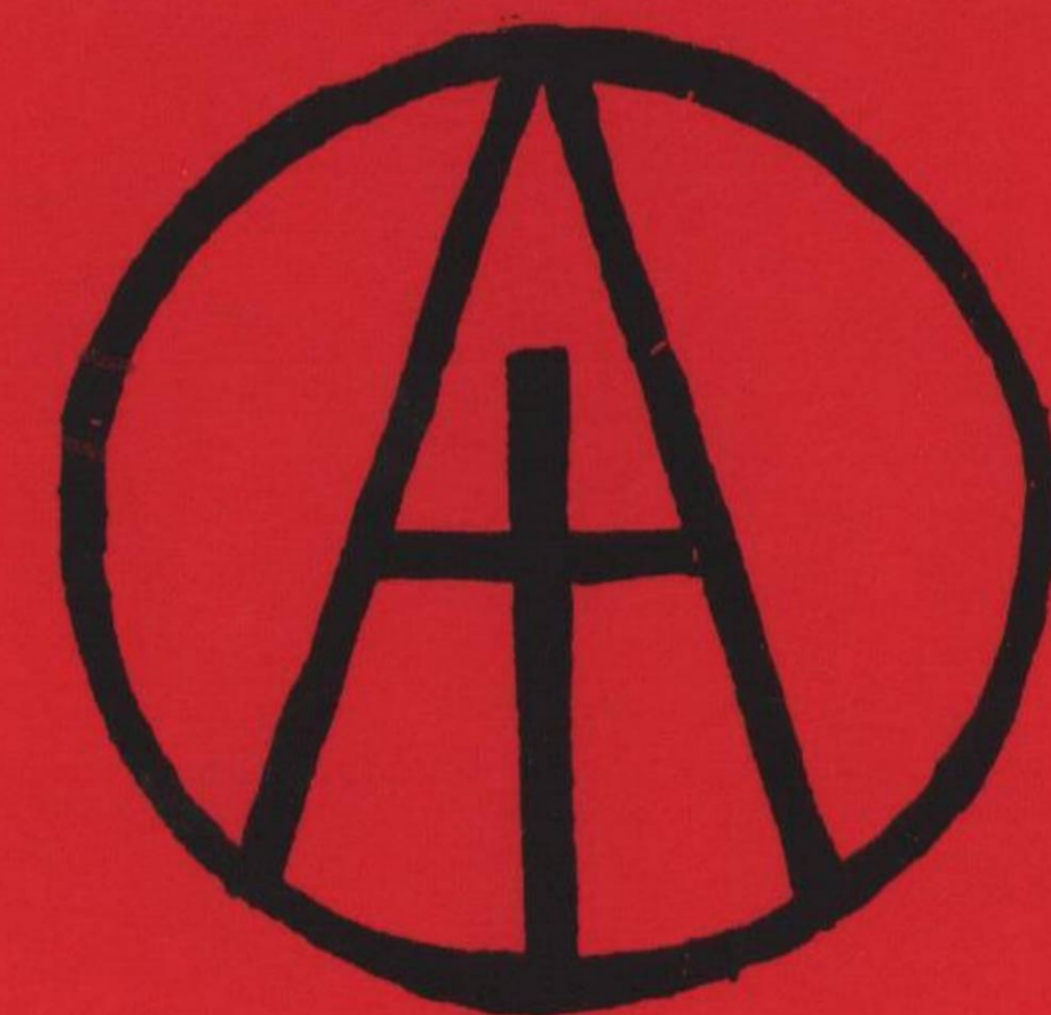


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Christianarchy A Primer in Christian Anarchism

by Wayne John



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by Wayne John



*I find myself in complete rupture with my epoch.
I sing freedom, which my epoch hates.
I do not love government and am religio-anarchist
tendency, while the epoch deifies government.
I am an extreme personalist, while the epoch is
collectivist and rejects the dignity and worth of
personality. I do not love war and the military
while the epoch lives in the pathos of war, I love
the philosophic mind while the epoch is indifferent
to it. I value aristocratic culture while the epoch
degrades it, and finally, I profess eschatological
christianity while the epoch recognises only
traditional - contemporal christianity.*

Nicholas Berdyaev



Introduction: The Demythologisation of the word "Anarchy"

What do we mean by the word "Anarchy"? Most dictionaries define it to mean *lawlessness, chaos, disorder, confusion*. Politicians and the media use the word in this negative sense, thus it is a word that needs much demythologising, so as to distinguish it from this semantic subversion of meaning.

The word in Greek simply means "without a ruler or leader". In Latin during the Middle Ages, the word was used to describe God as being without a beginning. In the New Testament *Arky* is usually interpreted as "beginning". The early Christians believed Jesus to be "the beginning", "the Arky of God" who held primacy over all the powers that be.

The prefix *an* is the equivalent of the word *un*, meaning "not": it does not then have to mean "anti" or "against", but speaks of that which is more "not" something than "opposed to" or "against".

It would be misleading nevertheless to offer a neat definition of anarchism, since most anarchist theory is in essence anti-dogmatic and anti-ideological, offering no manifesto, no party line, no economic blueprint, and no prepackaged description of how a new society would operate. Unlike the definitive and authoritarian manner of statist socialism or communism, anarchy rather proclaims that "the people without a vision perish", and therefore must build and incarnate their own vision to become themselves "ends in the means" of a world free from the State, political violence, and all hierarchical domination and exploitation.

The Idolatry of Ideology

While most of anarchist theory is very diverse and elastic, and there have been many currents and trends within anarchism, its understanding of a free society always includes certain central assumptions, ideas and themes, such as the realisation of a decentralised and self-regulating society consisting of "topless federations" and voluntary associations of mutualism between peoples of whatever age, sex, colour, class or creed.

At first sight, although many of the classic anarchist thinkers have been atheist or at least agnostic, historically the initial source of inspiration for anarchism was spiritual, coming from the mediaeval revolutions which were millenarian and apocalyptic. It was a later historical source, the Enlightenment, with its cry of "no Gods, no masters", and its rationalism and utopian romanticism concerning the inevitability of progress and the perfectibility of man, that rejected the initial spiritual source of inspiration.

Consequently, for "secular humanist" anarchists, the solution is autonomy - the self being a law unto itself. However, Christianity would contend that such autonomy as far as a relationship with a personal Creator goes is ultimately nothing more than a false freedom, bearing resemblance to the myth of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, where through misuse of free will, humanity is portrayed as being in a state of self-imposed alienation from the Creator. It is this sin that caused separation in the relationship between humanity and God.

With this in mind, a spiritually based anarchism has as its starting point not a social, economic or political theory, but rather the desire to understand the nature of humanity. Without the link to any particular creed or sect, its adherents reject all organised religion and hierarchical churches, witnessing instead to an all-inclusive universalism rather than any exclusivist right-wing fundamentalism. We should never identify the truth with ourselves, but, like John the Baptist, simply point to Jesus.

Against "His Story": Roots and Forerunners of Christian Anarchism

Anarchism is by no means necessarily either anti-religious or anti-Christian, and a Christian anarchism is not an attempt to form a synthesis of two contradictory and opposed systems, but rather an attempt to live the way of the Gospels.

Many individuals and groups throughout history have attempted to do this, such as elements of the early monastic movement, which grew up as a prophetic witness against the popular religion of the domesticating state church alliance. It was not until the fourth century A.D. that the Roman state became Christendom, and absorbed the way of Christ into a legitimisation of the powers that be. This was to further evolve and then split into the institution of the Papacy in the west, and the Orthodox Church in the east. The western church would then further split in the sixteenth century during the Protestant reformation.




We see in Constantine onwards the church and Christianity itself being co-opted by the dominant ideology of state power, with the "just war" theory and a progressive sacramentalism and clericalism, together with judicial and legalistic theories of original sin, the atonement, free will, predestination and the judgment to come. Whether Catholic or Protestant (in reality, just two sides of the same coin), the church, as Blake said, crucified Jesus all over again.

But unknown to many within the institutionalised churches, there had existed a third way, neither east nor west, Protestant nor Catholic. God's "underground" has always been bitterly persecuted and branded as heretical by the established churches. These people assembled under various names and in different ways, from the "Brethren of the Free Spirit" in the Middle Ages to the various anabaptist groups; and the radicals of the seventeenth century English Civil War, such as Gerrard Winstanley and the Diggers, the Levellers, the Ranters; and the Quakers who rejected priests and creeds, embracing non-violence and preaching equality between men and women. The Quakers still endure today as the religious Society of Friends.

Further on, we find the visionary poet, artist and mystic William Blake inspired by this tradition; the Russian writers Leo Tolstoy and Nicholas Berdyaev; the American minister Adin Ballou; the philosopher and Spanish Civil War veteran Simone Weil; within the Calvinist tradition, the writings of Jacques Ellul; sixties radical theology (especially "Situation" ethics and "process" theology). In the present day we have the Catholic Worker movement inspired by individuals such as Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy, with its "houses of hospitality" and its personalist/communitarian philosophy. The Protestant version of this is the "Sojourners" movement, inspired by the prophetic activism of Jim Wallis, and born of protest against the war in Vietnam, the struggle for black civil rights, and the campaign against nuclear weapons. Both Sojourners and the Catholic Worker are largely based in the U.S.A.

In Britain for a number of years there was the Pinch of Salt Collective, and notable recently, the writings of Michael C. Elliott "Freedom, Justice and Christian Counter Culture", and Vernard Eller's "Christian Anarchy". Also there is the newly revised "Book of Discipline, Faith and Practice" of the Society of Friends (Quakers), which shows an increasing and evolving libertarian sensibility.

We would also have to include in this brief historical overview, all the various liberation theology traditions and movements, whether in the name of pacifism, ecology, black rights, feminism, gay rights or animal liberation.

Anarchy and Christian Universalism   

Looking outside the Christian fold, we must embrace the fact that "the spirit blows where the spirit wills", and conclude that "Jesus is not a Christian" as Matthew Fox has said. Matthew Fox, along with the Wiccan Starhawk, has inspired what has come to be called the "Creation-centred Spirituality" movement, both primitivist and progressive, with deep libertarian leanings. Also, within the various traditions of

Taoism, Zen Buddhism, Sufism and paganism, we can discern mystical anarchist tendencies - not to mention the Sarvodaya movement within Hinduism which was inspired by Gandhi, with its central belief in "enlightened anarchy". In the many writings of the celebrated writer Aldous Huxley there can be seen a clear synthesis of spirituality and libertarianism.

As many today are speculating about the Age of Aquarius, or the "New Age", etc, we hear an echo of the apocalyptic millenarianism of revolutionary mystic Joachim of Fiore. Surely the anarchic holy spirit is truly a universal spirit, so what is atheism but that which sings God's praises whilst calling Him by another name?

Shalom my friend    

The ministry of Jesus does not represent apolitical other-worldly spiritualism. Unlike the extremes today within both political and religious culture of either collective mass conformity or extreme individualism, His message was one of people realising their "communal individuality" within a vision of salvation embracing the entire creation and cosmos. For God is *panentheistic*, both immanent and transcendent within creation, and the Christ is the emergent being within the evolutionary process who whilst still being grounded in eternity, has through death on the cross gone to the furthest reaches of humanity's alienation, even the hallowing of hell.

The early Christians were known as people of "the Way". The people of the Way believed Jesus to be the physical incarnation of God's "Shalom". This is the Hebrew word for peace and justice - a peace far more cosmic in its scope than merely being the absence of conflict. The Way would not recognise any other absolute primacy - something for which they were violently persecuted. In refusing to comply with the cult of the Roman emperor, the Way was seen as being subversive of both the political and religious establishment.

The people of the Way had no bible in the way it is commonly understood today, since the word meant not so much

a book as a Person: Jesus. To those who followed Him, He offered the Way, the Truth, and the Life: not a ritual, a creed or a theological party line.

Jesus taught that the Kingdom of God was within people, and already amongst them; and so "Shalom" has already come in embryonic form. This was a revolution not of power but of love, in the Person of the Son of Man. The Kingdom of God already existed within fallen society, and the ministry of the holy spirit was to make it more universally manifest. To live by the spirit of Christ and not by the spirit of the fallen world, Jesus likened it to a mustard seed, which although the smallest and weakest of all seeds, nonetheless when fully grown produces the biggest of all trees, in which the birds of the air come and make their nests.

Conclusion: The Apotheosis of Anarchy

The State is not something which can be destroyed by being overthrown. It is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behaviour. It can only be subverted by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently.

Gustav Landaver

For Christians, anarchy is never an end in itself but simply a way of making room for the Holy Spirit to lead. Christian Anarchists would not even necessarily argue that such "enlightened anarchy" is a realisable option for secular society now. Political authority and organisation may be necessities of social life in a fallen world, but nothing more than temporary necessities. The bare minimum will do; but when they are constantly tempted to take the place of God, they must be opposed. It is no part of Christian anarchy to want to attack, subvert, or overthrow worldly power - for to enter the struggle for power would be the first step to becoming like the evil one opposes. Can Satan cast out Satan?

The Way is not about seizing power, but rather

dispersing power and living the new Way now and within the shell of the old Babylonian order. A Christian anarchy therefore derives from the eschatological orientation of the Gospel - change not being dependent on violent revolution or human good will alone to create an unrealistic, idealistic, man-centred utopia, but on the resurrective power of the Holy Spirit. The Kingdom of God according to the scriptural definition cannot be considered a utopia, since it is in no way a projection of man's self-willed ability to create an order, or impose an order on things.

In this context, therefore, the Second Coming of Christ is interpreted in a revolutionary and liberating way. There is no particular class, church or organisation that will act as vanguards of change in a historical process, since all social, religious and political relationships in a fallen society share in that same spiritual condition, whether we be master or slave, ruler or ruled, we are all sinners in need of grace.

Yet this Second Coming is not an event to be anticipated in the future, but now. It is a realised eschatology, and it is only because of the eschatological orientation of the Christian faith that we can afford to be anarchist in respect to this world's authorities, since the only real authority is the authority on high, which completely relativises all others to the point where, as Saint Peter said in the book of Acts of the Apostles, "we must obey God rather than man". Amman Hennacy has said:

A Christian anarchist does not depend on bullets or ballots to achieve his ideal, and doesn't need a cop or a priest to tell him how to behave. He achieves his ideal by living daily the one man revolution with which he faces a decadent, confused and dying world.

Jesus lived, taught and incarnated this one man revolution, and showed what it is to be fully and authentically human, loving and free. Because of this he was crucified by a political and religious establishment, who saw him both as a political subversive and a religious blasphemer.

The Quaker tradition speaks of God in everyone: the inner light that enlightens all people who come into the world, whatever their colour, class, creed, age or sex. This inner light is the light of the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus: the Way; and there is no higher authority than this in the individual or the community.

The Kingdom is now and not yet, and we live out the paradox and tension this implies, between what is and what will be: and so, like Saint Paul, we look through a glass darkly, but one day we shall see and be seen face to face - and all desires will be known. The "accidental death of an anarchist" will be existential. Then we shall be able to echo Simone Weil in saying:

I am absolutely certain that there is a God in the sense that I am absolutely certain that my love is not illusory. I am absolutely certain that there is not a God in the sense that I am absolutely certain that there is nothing real which bears a resemblance to that which I am able to conceive when I pronounce that name, since I am unable to conceive God, but that thing which I am unable to conceive is not an illusion. This impossibility is more immediately present to me than is the feeling of my own personal existence.



Recommended further reading:

1. *Anarchism and Christianity.*
Jacques Ellul (Katalbgele, 1980)
2. *Christian Anarchy.*
Vernard Eller (Eerdmans, 1987)
3. *Freedom, Justice and Christian Counter Culture.*
Michael C. Elliott (SCM Press, 1990)
4. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism.*
Peter Marshall (Fontana Press, 1993)

The Quaker tradition of God in everyone: the inner light that enlightens all who come into the world,



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(Isaiah 11-6)

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