

Christian Anarchism: A Forgotten Alternative for the Peaceful Ordering of Society

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Abstract

Christian anarchists question the widespread belief that a socially contracted state provides the only guarantee of human freedom and security. For them, the state is a vicious system that perpetrates the very violence that its mandate pretends to keep at bay. They are therefore not surprised by the current climate of insecurity – but they believe the solution requires another look at Christianity and its political implications.

They think Christianity presents a radical alternative to secular methods, because it begins by positing an alternative view of human nature, one that calls for love and discipleship to recover mankind's initial but disrupted unity. They believe that the only way to achieve a peaceful social order is through Christian martyrdom and persuasion by example, not through the imposition of manmade laws by the threat of force. They see the authentic mission of Christianity as the enactment of the true ekklesia: there would be no state as we know it, and yet social order would be fulfilled through faith, charity and love of neighbour. For Christian anarchists, therefore, Christianity in this genuine sense has never actually been tried yet. To attain this social ideal, instead of relying on a state to protect them, human beings must acknowledge their personal responsibilities and learn to turn the other cheek, to love and patiently forgive, and to keep faith in the contagious power of such bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

It may be that Christian anarchists have too utopian a faith in the human capacity for pacifism and non-violence; and of course, their view is essentially religious, not secular. But their religious approach is refreshing precisely because it is peaceful, unlike certain antagonistic readings of Abrahamic Scriptures. Besides, their thinking poses fundamental questions about human nature that today's world would do well to ponder in its anxious search for a political solution to the current threats to freedom and security.

Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State. It was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified.

– Leo Tolstoy

Where there is no love, put love and you will find love.

– St. John of the Cross

Christianity and anarchism are rarely thought to belong together. Surely, the argument goes, Christianity is about as hierarchic a structure as you can get, and anarchism is not only the negation of any hierarchy but it is also often stubbornly secular and anti-clerical. Yet as Ciaron O'Reilly warns, Christian anarchism "is not an attempt to synthesise two systems of thought" that are hopelessly incompatible; rather, it is "a realisation that the premise of anarchism is inherent in christianity and the message of the Gospels."¹ For Christian anarchists, an honest and consistent application of Christianity would result in a political arrangement that would amount to anarchism, and the notion of a "Christian state" is just as meaningless an oxymoron as "hot ice."² So Christian anarchism is not about forcing together two very different systems of thought – it is about pursuing the political implications of Christianity to the fullest extent.

This paper will explore this unusual political vision by conveying some of the observations made by its main proponents, which include people like Leo Tolstoy, Vernard Eller, Jacques Ellul, Dorothy Day and Dave Andrews. First, an opening section will outline one of the Christian anarchist criticisms of the state as a brutal machine that does not protect but enslave its citizens. A second section will analyse the central role that Christian anarchists assign to love. The following section will look more closely at the Christian anarchist reading of some key Biblical passages, including the "Render unto Caesar" incident and Romans 13. This will be followed by a brief explanation of why their specific understanding of Christianity is hardly being heard of today. The fifth and final section will contrast the Christian perspective on human nature to the one assumed by much of modern political theory, and then offer some concluding remarks on the contemporary relevance of Christian anarchism.

State brutality

Today's proverbial man in the street relies on the state to guarantee his freedom and security.³ Without the supervision of the state, human relations would be plagued by disorder and insecurity. Without enforceable laws, the malicious element of human nature would be given *carte blanche* to poison all social interactions. Therefore human beings are such that they require a state to preserve order in society. Moreover, that state should be democratic, so that the arbiter of these necessary laws is

¹ Ciaron O'Reilly, "The Anarchist Implications of Christian Discipleship," *Social Alternatives* 2/3 (February 1982): 9-12, 9.

² Leo Tolstoy, "Church and State," in *On Life and Essays on Religion*, 338.

³ Although the masculine is used throughout the text for grammatical convenience, it should be understood that such general statements apply equally and without prejudice to both genders.

ultimately society as a whole and not some grumpy dictator that could do more harm than the all-out chaos that the state is there to protect us from in the first place. A democratic state is institutionally programmed to govern and design laws such that individual freedoms and collective security remain the highest political priorities.

That, in a sketchy and admittedly simplistic nutshell, is the rationale for the existence of the state that one hears from the average citizen of today's democracies. Having established this rationale early on in his life, this average citizen will then happily move on to concentrate his mind on how to ensure, within this political system, that he makes the most of this freedom while the state keeps an eye on the most serious threats to his security. In fact, Western civilisation as a whole also collectively adopted this same reasoning long ago, when in its adolescent and rebellious years it formulated the political theories that enabled it to reject the dangerous religious bias of its forefathers and grow into the modern, democratic and tolerant civilisation that it now prides itself to be. Thus, both today's average man in the street and Western civilisation as a collective whole are taking for granted that the democratic state is the best political system to promote liberty while maintaining order in society.

Christian anarchists, however, doubt this predominant line of reasoning. (All anarchists doubt it, of course, but the focus here will remain on Christian anarchists specifically.) They claim that the state fails to live up to the very purpose that it claims to fulfil. That is, far from preserving order and security, the state merely distorts injustice and perpetuates organised violence; and in doing so, far from safeguarding individual freedoms, it systematically imprisons its citizens by a clever mix of hypnotism, economic slavery and legitimised brutality. That, at least, is what Leo Tolstoy says in the various political essays that he published during the last thirty years of his life, after he converted to (his very idiosyncratic understanding of) Christianity. For him, the semblance of order achieved through the state is just as unjust as the disorder that it is supposed to save humanity from. Now, the limited scope of this paper makes it impossible to summarise all the criticisms that Christian anarchists level against the state – but Tolstoy's views are a good taster. Therefore, although much more can be found in some of the sources listed in the bibliography (including in Tolstoy), only Tolstoy's specific critique of the state as modern slavery will be outlined here.

The line of argument is fairly simple: Tolstoy first notes that there are always disagreements within society about proposed laws, and this then implies that some form of coercion or threat of it will always be required in order to enforce any particular law.⁴ But for Tolstoy, "being compelled to do what other people wish, against your own will, is slavery."⁵ Hence if violence must always be potentially called upon to enforce laws among defiant minorities, then all laws by definition amount to slavery. For Tolstoy, moreover, the cloak of democracy does not in the least redress this fundamental injustice:

When among one hundred men, one rules over ninety-one, it is unjust, it is a despotism; when ten rule over ninety, it is equally unjust, it is an oligarchy; but when fifty-one rule over forty-nine (and this is only theoretical, for in reality it is always ten or eleven of these fifty-one), it is entirely just, it is freedom!

⁴ Leo Tolstoy, *What to Do?* trans. unidentified (London: Walter Scott, n.d.), 148.

⁵ Leo Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," in *Essays from Tula*, [trans. Free Age Press] (London: Sheppard, 1948), 120.

Could there be anything funnier, in its manifest absurdity, than such reasoning? And yet it is this very reasoning that serves as the basis for all reformers of the political structure.⁶

So Tolstoy clearly did not consider democracy to escape from his criticism of law as amounting to slavery. Besides, as the parenthesis in this excerpt reveals, Tolstoy anyway did not believe that democracy is truly democratic: for him, it is driven by a small proportion of the population who impose their will upon the majority under a hypnotic pretence of democratic legitimacy.⁷

Furthermore, on top of this legislative dimension of slavery, Tolstoy criticised the modern state for perpetuating a cunning form of economic slavery, too. Tolstoy's denunciation of his contemporary economic system in fact continues to ring true today:

If the slave-owner of our time has not slave John, whom he can send to the cess-pool to clear out his excrements, he has five shillings of which hundreds of Johns are in such need that the slave-owner of our times may choose anyone out of hundreds of Johns and be a benefactor to him by giving him the preference, and allowing him, rather than another, to climb down into the cess-pool.⁸

Whereas physical violence was once needed to force slaves into carrying out degrading work, today's more advanced economic system has so successfully transposed the coercive element into the "system" that the employer can portray himself as a benefactor when he offers no less degrading work to the "lucky" employee who was picked out of many candidates who were forced to apply for such a job out of sheer hunger and economic necessity.

Such (legislative or economic) slavery, of course, does not appear to be such an improvement from the initial "state of nature" that humanity is assumed to have been saved from through the social contract that theoretically established the state. In the place of the lawless disorder, insecurity and injustice of a hypothetical "state of nature," modern political theory has ordained a state machinery that keeps the majority enslaved and behaves exactly like the villain it was supposed to eradicate – only on a much broader, institutionalised scale.⁹ The resulting society is no more just or even secure than the presumed original, though it may succeed in projecting a semblance of peaceful order that appears worth clinging to even in the face of other criticisms.

And yet even that order is illusory. The state's violence breeds discontent at home, but so too does its behaviour in international relations. In the domestic sphere, sooner or later enslaved citizens get together and either seek to change the system (be it through boycotts, terrorism or mass revolution) or to work around it but for their own benefit (such as by earning a "fair" living through crime) – either way, the illusory order actually breeds social disorder.¹⁰ And in the international sphere, where states maintain powerful armies and plunder one another for wealth or to assuage sometimes paranoid feelings of insecurity – in this international sphere even the

⁶ Leo Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," in *A Confession and Other Religious Writings*, trans. Jane Kentish (London: Penguin, 1987), 165.

⁷ See, for instance: Leo Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God is Within You," in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (New Delhi: Rupa, 2001); Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence;" Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times."

⁸ Tolstoy, "The Slavery of Our Times," 95.

⁹ Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God is Within You."

¹⁰ Leo Tolstoy, "What's To Be Done?" in *Recollections and Essays*, trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Humphrey Milford, 1937); Leo Tolstoy, "I Cannot Be Silent," in *Recollections and Essays*; Leo Tolstoy, "'Thou Shalt Not Kill,'" in *Recollections and Essays*.

delusion of order is hard to believe in.¹¹ The point here is that for Christian anarchists, the very structure of the state and of the international system of states is bound to generate disorder and insecurity. For them, events such as the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were less an interruption from an otherwise just order than the predictable product of a deluded system. Violence generates further violence, and so a political order based on “legitimate” violence is always under (domestic or international) threat from people who feel mistreated and who are embittered enough to use just as violent methods in their struggle to settle any perceived injustice.

The state is a complex machinery that abuses the monopoly over the legitimate use of violence that modern political theory bestows it. It secures obedience to its laws only through the threat and use of violence over its citizens, and thus maintains the people it was designed to save under a systemic kind of slavery. The order that it therefore protects is not just, and because of this, neither can it ever really be secure. Violence breeds more violence, and so sooner or later, the state’s acts of violence and injustice result in retaliatory acts of further violence and injustice. For Tolstoy, the political system instituted by modern political theory fails to truly guarantee freedom, order and security. There must surely be a more humane alternative.

Love

This alternative, for Christian anarchists, is to be found in Christianity. Where modern political theory deals with injustice and insecurity by force, by giving the monopoly over the legitimate use of force to the state, Christian anarchism argues that the best response to violence and injustice is actually Christian love. That is, Christian anarchists believe that a just social order can only be secured through the stubborn enactment of brotherly love, not through any system of rewards and punishments policed by a scolding father. The ordering principle of society would thus be love, not the threat of violence.

According to Tolstoy, the essence of this Christian alternative is best expressed in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and in particular in the following verses:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth:
But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also.
And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also.
And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain.
Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.¹²

Tolstoy thus understands Jesus as spelling out a completely new and wiser method for human beings to deal with evil, with fear, violence or insecurity: when treated unjustly, do not use force or retaliate, but respond with love, forgiveness and generosity. Dave Andrews agrees: “Christ is the archetype of compassion – the original model of radical, non-violent, sacrificial love – which humanity desperately

¹¹ Leo Tolstoy, “Bethink Yourselves!” in *Recollections and Essays*; Tolstoy, “The Kingdom of God is Within You;” Leo Tolstoy, “Patriotism and Government,” in *The Kingdom of God and Peace Essays*.

¹² Matthew 5:38-42 (King James Version’s italics removed).

needs, now more than ever, if it is to find a way to save itself from the cycles of violence that will otherwise destroy it.”¹³

For all Christian anarchists, therefore, the radical political innovation of Jesus’ message was to put forward a completely different way of responding to whatever may be seen as evil. That is, even in the face of unjust demands, behave like a generous and loving servant; do not rebel, do not get angry, and certainly do not even contemplate using power to enforce your view of justice. In the eyes of Christian anarchists, the political implications are self-evident: the only response to disorder and insecurity in human relations is not to delegate power to a state, but to act as Jesus taught and acted – even if the ultimate price is one’s own death (or crucifixion).¹⁴

But this does mean that the Christian (anarchist) has to abandon the apparent effectiveness of social engineering. Inasmuch as he wishes to change the world, in Dorothy Day’s words, he can only do this “one heart at a time.”¹⁵ Christian anarchists thus believe in persuasion by example, not force. The hope is that love and forgiveness eventually win over the evildoer through the heart. In the face of love and forgiveness, one day the evildoer will repent. But in the meantime, cheeks keep being smitten and coats keep being taken away. The Christian (anarchist), however, does not seek punishment and redress but patiently and generously forgives the wrongdoer.

Hence to use Vernard Eller’s words, the Christian anarchist chooses the path of “voluntary self-subordination” as the “model of social justice.”¹⁶ Andrews therefore speaks of treating Christ as a *model* rather than an *idol*:

The example of Christ [...] is so powerful that many of us find it overpowering and, therefore, unfortunately, disempowering, rather than empowering as it ought to be.

So we tend to treat Christ as our *idol*, someone we’d like to be like, but know we never will be like; rather than our *model*, someone we’d like to be like, and do our best to be sure we are like. But Christ never wanted to be an *idol*. He never asked anyone to worship him. Christ only wanted to *model* how to live life to the full. And all he asked of people who wanted to live this way was to follow him.¹⁷

Christian anarchists thus bemoan the fact that Christianity has evolved into the worship of an idol rather than the personal and collective effort to imitate Jesus and thereby represent him (make him present) in the world.

Yet if, instead of delegating government of society to a system that legitimises some violence and punishment, Christians were to choose to govern their lives by love and compassion, then there would be no need for a state. The only thing that would “govern” or steer this stateless society would be love. Humanity would resemble the original meaning of *ekklesia* as a “gathering” of individuals into community and communion.¹⁸ And gradually, more and more people would indeed gather because “the beauty of love and justice embodied in [these] communities will encourage all men and all women of goodwill to continue to do good works as well.”¹⁹ Christian anarchists therefore see no validity in separating ends and means:

¹³ Dave Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy: Discovering a Radical Spirituality of Compassion*, (Oxford: Lion, 1999), 100.

¹⁴ For an example of such readiness to die, see: Dom Helder Camara, “Violence, Non-Violence and the Christian,” *London Catholic Worker* 13 (April 2005), 6.

¹⁵ Quoted in the *London Catholic Worker* 13 (April 2005), 6.

¹⁶ Vernard Eller, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus’ Primacy over the Powers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 239-240, and chapter 10 in general for an elaboration of this argument.

¹⁷ Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*, 114 (Andrews’ emphasis).

¹⁸ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 49.

¹⁹ Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*, 126.

violence breeds violence, and only love can breed love and gather humanity into a peaceful community.

Of course, this goal does appear distant and utopian, and it is easy to accuse Christian anarchists of lack of realism. Love, forgiveness and non-resistance to evil are difficult enough to enact on a personal level, let alone as a whole community. But here, Tolstoy has this to say:

It may be affirmed that the constant fulfilment of this rule [of love and non-resistance] is difficult, and that not every man will find his happiness in obeying it. It may be said that it is foolish; that, as unbelievers pretend, Jesus was a visionary, an idealist, whose impracticable rules were only followed because of the stupidity of his disciples. But it is impossible not to admit that Jesus did say very clearly and definitely that which he intended to say: namely, that men should not resist evil; and that therefore he who accepts his teaching cannot resist.²⁰

So although the practicality of Christian anarchists' vision can be argued upon, the grounding of it in scripture is harder to dispute. They certainly believe that their interpretation is validated by countless passages of the New Testament, and that any other interpretation that compromises with the state exposes both hypocrisy and a lack of faith in the very essence of Jesus' teaching. According to Christian anarchists, the political implications of Christianity might be utopian, but they are made clear throughout the Bible: Jesus revealed the foundations of a community based on love, a community in which love and forgiveness can be the only response to injustice and insecurity, a community therefore that cannot but reject the state as we know it.

The Word's rejection of the state

Aside from numerous verses on love and forgiveness, Christian anarchists point to several passages in both the Old and New Testament to further validate their interpretation of Christianity. Only the most significant of these can be reviewed here – but many more can be found in the Christian anarchist literature.

One example concerns the third of Jesus' temptations in the desert, which reads as follows:

Again, the devil taketh him up into an exceedingly high mountain, and sheweth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them;

And saith unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me.

Then saith Jesus unto him, Get thee hence, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.²¹

Jacques Ellul argues that according to this text, “all powers, all the power and glory of the kingdoms, all that has to do with politics and political authority, belongs to the devil.”²² It is moreover important to note that Jesus does not deny that political power does indeed belong to the devil. Rather, “he refuses the offer of power because the devil demands that he should fall down before him and worship him.”²³ Jesus refuses political power because it would entail worship of the devil. (Besides, Ellul remarks that etymologically, devil means “the divider” or “to divide,” and hence that “the state

²⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *What I Believe* [trans. Fyvie Mayo?] (London: C. W. Daniel, n.d.), 18-19.

²¹ Matthew 4:8-10 (King James Version).

²² Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 58.

²³ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 58.

and politics are thus primary reasons for division.”²⁴) So Jesus declines the possibility of ruling the world politically. He rejects the state because he can only serve one Lord, and it is not possible to serve both God and the state.

A similar point is made in the Old Testament. Until Samuel, Israel had no king. Decisions were taken mostly by popular assembly: “people did what was right in their own eyes.”²⁵ But in 1 Samuel 8, people told Samuel that they wanted a king so that they could be like other nations and have a better military leader. As Ellul explains, “Samuel protested and went to God in prayer. The God of Israel replied: Do not be upset. The people have not rejected you, Samuel, but me, God. [...] Accept their demand but warn them of what will happen.”²⁶ Samuel then warned them of all the abuses of power that would ensue, but they wanted their king. And so they chose an earthly ruler, a state, instead of God. (Note that even though he disapproved, God allowed them to freely reject him.²⁷)

Another important passage in terms of how to respond to fear and insecurity can be found in Matthew 26:51-52. Jesus has just been betrayed by Judas, and is about to be taken away. One of his disciples then draws out his sword and strikes one of the guards. But Jesus famously tells him to put away his sword, because “all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword.”²⁸ So once again, even in the face of perceived injustice or insecurity, do not resort to any violence, because “it can only give rise to further violence.”²⁹ And as Ellul notes, the warning applies quite broadly. On the one hand, “since the state uses the sword, it will be destroyed by the sword, as centuries of history have shown us.”³⁰ But on the other, this can also be seen as a caution to Christians: “do not fight the state with the sword, for if you do, you will be killed by the sword.”³¹ Violence should never be used, neither to hold political authority nor to overthrow it. And when violence *is* used, then no validation for it can be claimed from Christianity, because Jesus explicitly denounces it.

So, Christian anarchists understand Christianity to be strictly incompatible with the state and political power; for them, Christianity is the only real alternative for the peaceful ordering of society. However, there are two important phrases from the New Testament that are frequently raised against Christian anarchists as if these self-evidently contradict their political interpretation: “Render to Caesar,” and Paul’s instructions in Romans 13. These must now be analysed to show why Christian anarchists consider them not as contradicting but as actually furthering their own understanding.

It is important to recall the details of the “Render to Caesar” episode before commenting on it.³² The story reads as follows:

And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words.

²⁴ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 58.

²⁵ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 47.

²⁶ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 48.

²⁷ Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, “Embracing God, Rejecting Masters,” *Christianarchy* 1/1 (Sept. 2005), 2.

²⁸ Matthew 26:52 (King James Version).

²⁹ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 65.

³⁰ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 65.

³¹ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 65.

³² The exposition of the Christian anarchist argument here follows Ellul. But one can also find interesting and similar remarks in Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, chap. 4 and 8, and in John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, second edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994), chap. 2.

And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?

Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? Bring me a penny, that I may see it.

And they brought it. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's.

And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.³³

Ellul notes that in the first place, if they put this question to Jesus, it must have been because it was already debated, and Jesus must have had “the reputation of being hostile to Caesar.”³⁴ But aside from this, it must be borne in mind that “in the Roman world an individual mark on an object denoted ownership.”³⁵ Hence the coin actually belonged to Caesar.³⁶ No surprise, then, that Jesus says “Give it back to him when he demands it.”³⁷ Nevertheless, Ellul continues, “Jesus does not say that taxes are lawful.”³⁸

So the key question is “what really belongs to Caesar?” Ellul replies: “Whatever bears his mark! Here is the basis and limit of his power. But where is his mark? On coins, on public monuments, and on certain altars. That is all. [...] On the other hand, whatever does not bear Caesar's mark does not belong to him. It belongs to God.”³⁹ For instance, Caesar has no right over life and death. That belongs to God. Hence while the state can expect us to do what it wishes with its belongings, it has no right to kill dissidents or plunge a country into war.⁴⁰ Therefore the “Render to Caesar” episode seems to reinforce, not weaken, the case made by Christian anarchists. Some things do belong to Caesar, but many more essential things belong to God, and the state is overstepping its mark when it encroaches upon God's domain.

But then what about Romans 13? Paul therein does clearly assert: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.”⁴¹ It would seem that this finally contradicts Christian anarchism. Indeed, this passage has often been used to justify the divine institution of civil government – up to and including the Nazis.⁴² And yet here again, Christian anarchists offer a compelling response.⁴³

For a start, one must realise that Romans 12 and 13 “in their entirety form a literary unit.”⁴⁴ In both chapters, Paul is writing about love and sacrifice, about overcoming evil with good, about willingly offering oneself up for persecution. In doing so, he is mainly repeating the message that Jesus articulated not only in the Sermon on the Mount and other parables, but also in the very way he lived and died –

³³ Mark 12:13-17 (King James Version's italics removed).

³⁴ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 59.

³⁵ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 59.

³⁶ The same logic still applies today, as a close look at the small print of most bank notes exposes.

³⁷ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 60.

³⁸ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 60.

³⁹ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 60.

⁴⁰ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 61.

⁴¹ Romans 13:1 (King James Version).

⁴² Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 193.

⁴³ The argument summarised here is a combination of the following: Nekeisha Alexis-Manners, “Deconstructing Romans 13: Verse 1-2,” <www.jesusradicals.com/essays/theology/Romans13.htm> accessed on 28/10/2005; Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, chap. 8; Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, chap. 2 and appendix; Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, chap. 10.

⁴⁴ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 196.

after all, Jesus' ultimate act of love and sacrifice was to subject himself to Roman crucifixion.⁴⁵ But the point is that as John Howard Yoder asserts, "any interpretation of 13:1-7 which is not also an expression of suffering and serving love must be a misunderstanding of the text in its context."⁴⁶ And in Ellul's words, once one interprets Romans 12 and 13 as a coherent whole, one notes that "there is a progression of love from friends to strangers and then to enemies, and this is where the passage then comes. In other words, we must love enemies and therefore we must even respect the authorities."⁴⁷ So Paul's message in Romans 13 is to call for Christians to subject themselves to political powers *in an act of love*, forgiveness and sacrifice.

It is also worth repeating Eller's point that to "be subject to" does not mean to worship, to "recognise the legitimacy of" or to "own allegiance to."⁴⁸ Ellul thus comments that "we have no right to claim God in validation of this order as if he were at our service. [...] This takes away all the pathos, justification, illusion, enthusiasm, etc" that can be associated with any specific political authority.⁴⁹ So no specific government has any particularly special relationship with God, even though God will use it in his mysterious ordering of the cosmos.⁵⁰ Therefore, according to Ellul, "the only one whom we must fear is God," and "the only one to whom honour is due is God" – not political authorities.⁵¹

But anyhow, "the immediate concrete meaning of this text for the Christian Jews in Rome," John Howard Yoder indicates, "is to call them away from any notion of revolution or insubordination. The call is to a non-resistant attitude towards a tyrannical government."⁵² Paul is calling for Roman Christians to act as Jesus did. Besides, if you choose resistance, Eller remarks, "you could find yourself resisting the particular use God has in mind for that empire."⁵³ Thus Paul, just as Jesus did before him, is advising against political upheaval and instead calling for love, sacrifice and forgiveness. And so Romans 13, when understood in its context, ends up supporting rather than discrediting Christian anarchists.

Christian history

If Christian anarchists are so right, however, how come their version of Christianity has hardly ever been heard of? The short answer is that the church colluded with the state and thereby compromised the essence of Jesus' teaching. For Christian anarchists, it all went downhill after Emperor Constantine, when "Christ, who had turned the Roman empire upside down, was turned into a lap-dog for the Roman emperor."⁵⁴ The early church had strived to enact Jesus' teaching. But with Constantine's "conversion," what had begun as a voluntary, nonviolent movement, a conscious choice of love, forgiveness and sacrifice eventually became a compulsory

⁴⁵ Alexis-Manners, "Deconstructing Romans 13: Verse 1-2."

⁴⁶ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 196.

⁴⁷ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 81.

⁴⁸ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 199.

⁴⁹ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 88.

⁵⁰ Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 202.

⁵¹ Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 81.

⁵² Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 202.

⁵³ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 203.

⁵⁴ Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*, 70.

and hence meaningless tag synonymous with the status quo. And predictably, scriptural exegesis was thereafter reassessed in order to justify unquestioning obedience to the state.

Tolstoy uses particularly strong language to condemn this corruption of Christianity.⁵⁵ Although the following are not his words but Henry George's, he quotes them at length because they eloquently echo his view:

The Christian revelation was the doctrine stating the equality of men, that God is the Father and that all men are brothers. It struck to the core of the monstrous tyranny which inspired the civilized world; it smashed the slaves' chains and annihilated the enormous injustice whereby a small group of people could live in luxury at the expense of the masses, and ill-treat the so-called working classes. This is why the first Christians were persecuted and why, once it became clear that they could not be suppressed, the privileged classes adopted it and perverted it. It ceased to be the celebration of the true Christianity of the first centuries and to a significant extent became the tool of the privileged classes.⁵⁶

When Constantine converted to Christianity, instead of adapting politics to Jesus' teaching, "they arranged a Christianity for him, [...] they carefully devised a kind of Christianity for him that would let him continue to live his old heathen life unembarrassed."⁵⁷ The resulting paradox, for Tolstoy, was most visible in the army. Before Constantine, Origen had justified Christians' refusal of military service by arguing "that Christians fight more than others for the sake of the Emperor, but they do it through good deeds, prayers, and by setting a good example to others," not through armed combat.⁵⁸ But this changed:

Under Constantine the cross had already appeared on the standard of the Roman Legions. In 416 a decree was issued forbidding pagans to join the army. All the soldiers became Christians: that is, all the Christians, with only a few exceptions, renounced Christ.⁵⁹

And so for Christian anarchists, Christianity never recovered from this compromise with political power. Emperors, Crusades, the Inquisition, the Wars of Religion – according to Christian anarchists, none of these really have anything to do with the essence of Christianity. Those dark chapters of history were political power-games in which Christianity was hypocritically used as hypnotic cloak to mobilise the masses; and as a result, the real meaning of Jesus' teaching remained hidden under thick layers of lies and stupefying rituals.⁶⁰

In a way, therefore, Christian anarchists would argue that Christianity has never really been tried yet politically on a significant enough scale. The early churches did their best; but they were betrayed by the Roman authorities' manipulation of their cause. In the late Middle Ages, several millenarian movements and protestant sects (such as the Anabaptists, the Mennonites, the Hussites and the Quakers) endeavoured to apply some of the political aspects of Jesus' teachings; but

⁵⁵ In particular, see: Leo Tolstoy, "An Appeal to the Clergy," in *On Life and Essays on Religion*; Tolstoy, "Church and State;" Leo Tolstoy, "The Restoration of Hell," in *On Life and Essays on Religion*; Leo Tolstoy, "What is Religion, and Wherein Lies Its Essence?" in *On Life and Essays on Religion*; Tolstoy, *What I Believe*.

⁵⁶ Henry George, quoted by Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," 187.

⁵⁷ Tolstoy, "Church and State," 339-340; see also Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God is Within You," 164.

⁵⁸ Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," 188.

⁵⁹ Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," 190.

⁶⁰ On this, see Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*; William T. Cavanaugh, "'A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House:' The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11/4 (October 1995): 397-420; and most of Tolstoy's political writings already mentioned above.

although some of these survive today, they often compromised their goals in the face of persecution.⁶¹ There are also both ancient and more recent examples of conscientious objectors inspired by Jesus' example of love and non-resistance; but these examples of bravery remained local and individual, not social.⁶²

Today, the Catholic Worker Movement, founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, continues to strive to embody the Christian anarchist society that Jesus described through its network of houses of hospitality, through its publications and through its involvement in selected public demonstrations.⁶³ And there are groups like the "Jesus Radicals," formed on the internet, which organises conferences and discussion groups on a Christian anarchist vision for society.⁶⁴

But these are all small-scale examples. The political implications of Jesus' teaching have never really been tried yet at any society-wide level – if anything, they have been forgotten, even by self-proclaimed Christians. Almost all Christians today accept the premise that the state is necessary to preserve our freedom and security. Almost all Christians today explain away the more radical element of Jesus' message as admirable but unrealistic. And almost all Christians today accept that a good Christian ought to work within modern political institutions rather than undermine them from a religious perspective. For Christian anarchists, however, Christianity actually proposes a radical alternative to the state, and only Christians who stubbornly enact even the most radical of Jesus' commandments are faithful to their professed religion.

Human nature and religion today

It may be that the Christian anarchist vision is too utopian and unrealistic, but to them, it is undeniably grounded in Christian scripture: it is the political vision that Jesus called his disciples to, and they have faith in that vision. This is not to say that they believe in it against all reason – to the contrary, they consider it to be the only reasonable and sustainable alternative around. For them, the only way to break the vicious cycle of fear, violence and insecurity is to overcome it by a virtuous cycle of love, forgiveness and sacrifice. Some Christian anarchists would even argue that ultimately, it is not a question of contrasting a religious perspective on politics to a secular one, because they consider Jesus' teaching to be eminently rational.⁶⁵

Many secular anarchists, however, may protest that anarchism rejects all rulers and tyrants, and that this list must de facto include "God." Yet as Nekeisha Alexis-Baker explains,

the simplistic representations of God as "All-powerful, the King, the Autocrat, the radical Judge, [and] the Terrible One" that are held by some anarchists and Christians is the heart of the problem. [...] Throughout the Bible, [...] God is also identified as Creator, Liberator, Teacher, Healer, Guide, Provider, Protector and Love. By making

⁶¹ Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*, sect. 3; Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, chap. 2; Tolstoy, "The Kingdom of God is Within You," preface and chap. 1 and 3.

⁶² Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, chap. 8; Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, introduction and appendix; Tolstoy, "The Law of Love and the Law of Violence," chap. 9 and 11.

⁶³ Andrews, *Christi-Anarchy*, sect. 4; Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness: The Autobiography of the Legendary Catholic Social Activist* (New York: Harper and Row, 1952); *London Catholic Worker* pamphlets.

⁶⁴ See <www.jesusradicals.com>.

⁶⁵ For example, see: Tolstoy, "What is Religion?" and Tolstoy, *What I Believe*.

monarchical language the primacy descriptor of God, Christians misrepresent the full character of God.⁶⁶

God is not some whimsical tyrant ruling his subjects from up in the clouds. What he really is, even to the tradition, remains a subtle mystery that only reveals itself through patient contemplation. But the point here is that it is too simplistic to accuse God of behaving like a dictator that any true anarchist must reject (especially since according to the New Testament he sent his Son, who is love, to save humanity from its predicament).

All this, of course, raises some fundamental questions about human nature. But this is where Christianity and Christian anarchism may offer a helpful contrast to modern political theory.⁶⁷ The starting point for modern political theory is to assume a violent “state of nature” in which human relations are plagued with injustice and brutality. Thankfully, however, the theory goes that human beings possess reason, and reason eventually brings them to the conclusion that all would benefit from a social contract whereby the monopoly of the use of force would be granted to a central authority whose mandate would be the preservation of peace.⁶⁸ This socially contracted state thus saves humanity from the endless conflict that would prevail if things were left unchecked. But all of this assumes that chaos would indeed prevail if the natural and irrational instincts of human beings were not tamed by the state.

The Christian understanding of human nature takes a different starting point. Whereas for modernity humanity is constituted by countless separate individuals competing with each other, Christianity tells the story of the disrupted unity in God of the human race, a unity that is to be restored only through collective participation in the body of Christ.⁶⁹ In one case, the salvation of humanity from its lawless condition is to be enacted by a common assent to the authority of the state; in the other, the salvation of humanity is to be enacted by re-presenting Christ through participation in the *ekklesia*.⁷⁰ Thus it would seem that the recommended social organisation of humanity evolves inevitably out of the assumptions initially made about human nature. If men naturally fight against one another, then the solution is to grant all legitimate power to a reasonable but strong lawmaker; but if all suffering stems from the disruption of an original unity in God, then the solution is to reconstitute this unity by participating in divine communion.

Now, it should be noted that not all Christian anarchists would necessarily approve of the exact wording in which the story of Christianity has just been summarised. But they would all agree that Christianity posits a very different understanding of human nature than modern political theory, and that what characterises the Christian message is an unshakable faith in the power of love to create a sincere community and bind it together. So in today’s debate about liberty, security and the challenge of government, Christian anarchists are helpful not only in presenting an alternative approach for political interaction, but also for going as far as

⁶⁶ Alexis-Baker, “Embracing God, Rejecting Masters,” 2.

⁶⁷ For the comparison of modern political theory with the Christian story that inspires the following paragraphs, see William T. Cavanaugh, “The City: Beyond Secular Parodies,” in John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁶⁸ This is obviously a succinct (thus imperfect) synopsis of the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke and perhaps to a lesser extent Rousseau. For a more detailed summary and for references to their original works, see Cavanaugh, “The City,” 186-190.

⁶⁹ Cavanaugh, “The City,” 183-190.

⁷⁰ Cavanaugh, “The City,” 184.

to question the ontological assumptions about human nature that are often taken for granted in contemporary political debates.

Furthermore, there is no reason to fear the political activity of Christian anarchists. In the first place, the idea that violence and bloodshed automatically follows when religion ventures into politics is both short-minded and historically questionable. Indeed, Cavanaugh argues fairly convincingly that contrary to popular opinion, the modern secular state was not the white knight that saved humanity from otherwise endless religious wars.⁷¹ In a nutshell, he contends that the “Wars of Religion” of the sixteenth and seventeenth century were in fact “the birthpangs of the State,” that they “were fought largely for the aggrandizement of the emerging State over the decaying remnants of the medieval ecclesial order,” and that “to call these conflicts ‘Wars of Religion’ is an anachronism, for what was at issue in these wars was the very creation of religion as a set of privately held beliefs without direct political relevance.”⁷² It would therefore seem wrong to think that history clearly proved that religion is the main cause of conflict and war. Besides, for Christian anarchists, it is in fact the state that epitomises the cycle of violence that humanity should evolve away from.

But what should finally appease the secularists and even give them reasons to be fond of Christian anarchists is the fact that their approach is obstinately peaceful and loving. In a world in which Abrahamic Scriptures can often be interpreted in antagonistic fashion, Christian anarchists offer a religious alternative that is refreshing because of the primacy it accords to love, non-violence and charity.

Christian anarchists do not believe that the state guarantees freedom, order and security. Indeed, they consider it guilty of playing an essential role in the perpetuation of this dangerous cycle of violence that humanity has been suffering from for too long. They believe that Christianity offers the only viable (even if hard to live up to) alternative by juxtaposing a virtuous cycle of love to this vicious cycle of violence, to eventually overcome it. They take a view of human nature that is very different from the one assumed by most political theorist, and based upon it they develop a vision for society that can certainly be criticised for being utopian and indeed religious. But in the current religious and political climate of fear, violence and insecurity, their voice and, through their interpretation, the voice of Jesus remains worth hearing and thus paying closer attention to.

⁷¹ Cavanaugh, “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House.’”

⁷² Cavanaugh, “‘A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House,’” 398.

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