

Book Review

Christian Anarchism

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Christoyannopoulos, Alexandre (2011). *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel (Abridged Edition)*. Exeter: Imprint Academic.

This book is a revised version of the doctoral thesis of Alexandre Christoyannopoulos at what may be the world's only university-level anarchist studies program in Loughborough, England. The stated goal is to present, for the first time ever, a general outline of Christian anarchist thought. That goal (and the degree to which it largely succeeds) is what makes this book stand out.

For many people (even—or especially—those who self-identify as Christian or anarchist), the idea of Christian anarchism may sound like a contradiction in terms. A common thread running throughout the book is however the idea that Christian anarchism simply consists of the contention that the teachings and example of Jesus logically imply anarchism. The author writes:

Ciaron O'Reilly [a writer associated with the Catholic Worker Movement] warns . . . that Christian anarchism “is not an attempt to synthesize two systems of thought” that are hopelessly incompatible, but rather “a realization that the premise of anarchism is inherent in Christianity and the message of the Gospels.” For Christian anarchists, Jesus' teaching implies a critique of the state, and an honest and consistent application of Christianity would lead to a stateless society. From this perspective, it is actually the notion of a “Christian state” that, just like “hot ice,” is a contradiction in terms, an oxymoron. Christian anarchism is not about forcing together two very different systems of thought—it is about pursuing the radical political implica-

tions of Christianity to the fullest extent. (1)

Now, this contention (as this book makes clear) is hardly new. What is new here is the presentation of a great number of Christian anarchist theorists in a single book. To the best of my knowledge, there is no other book where one can find a similarly comprehensive survey of Christian anarchist theorists. It is a formidable task to say the least. After all, the disparate range of individuals and groups who could fall under the umbrella of “Christian anarchism” stretch far and wide over the last two thousand years. Subsequently, pains are made to clarify the research limitations: coverage is restricted to explicitly Christian *anarchist* thought and therefore does not spend much time on related topics such as liberation theology and Christian pacifism. This stipulation also restricts the focus largely (but not exclusively) to thinkers from the 19th century onward.

The book begins by introducing the reader to key Christian anarchist thinkers (presented presumably in order of importance): Leo Tolstoy, Jacques Ellul, Vernard Eller, Michel C. Elliott, Dave Andrews, Catholic Workers Movement writers (such as Ammon Hennacy), “writers behind other Christian anarchist publications” (such as Stephen Hancock and Kenneth C. Hone), William Lloyd Garrison, Hugh O. Pentecost, Nicolas Berdyaev, William T. Cavanaugh, Jonathan Bartley, George Tarleton, Christian anarcho-capitalists (such as James Redford and Kevin Craig), and “supportive thinkers” (the author’s term to describe those who presented arguments that have lent support to Christian anarchist interpretations but who did not themselves “reach the anarchist conclusions”), namely, Peter Chelčický, Adin Ballou, Ched Myers, Walter Wink, John Howard Yoder, and Archie Penner (21, 26).

Then the book continues to delve into exegetical analyses of biblical scripture: Anarchism was inherent in the Jewish culture in which Jesus was raised. The “Israelites had no king, no central government” and major decisions were made either by popular assemblies or temporary “judges” who “possessed only a limited form of authority” (68–69). So, for the early formative part of Jewish history, there was no state, no king, no prisons, no taxes, and no executive or legislative institution. God alone was regarded as the ruling power. The turning point came in I Samuel 8 when the Israelites demanded a king. Samuel is instructed to warn the Israelites of the dire consequences that result from political power and the desire to be like other nations. God essentially regards their choice to submit to human dictatorship to be heretical yet,

“even though God does not approve of human government, he accepts or tolerates it” (71). Then with the rise of Jesus the Christ, the rejection of state power became most clearly manifest: Satan attempts to tempt Jesus with political authority and, in doing so, makes clear that the “state derives its power and authority from Satan” (75). Jesus is unambiguous in his devotion to God and shows no desire to accept Satan’s offer to rule society from above. The type of society that Jesus advocates organizing is based not on police, courts, and coercion but on forgiveness (Matthew 18: 21–22), refusal to judge (John 8: 1–11), bottom-up organization and voluntary service (Matthew 20: 20–28; Matthew 23: 11; Mark 10: 35–45), direct action (Mark 11: 15–18; Luke 19: 45–48), and non-violence (Luke 22: 35–53). The core of Jesus’ anarchist message is traced to the Sermon on the Mount wherein the principles of non-violence are explicitly laid out. The state, based upon the monopoly on violence, is therefore necessarily an heretical institution as it is “founded upon the very thing that Jesus prohibits” (44).

As examples of how Christians throughout the ages have implemented these anarchist teachings, Christoyannopoulos briefly touches on a number of groups: the early Christian communities who refused to worship the state, rejected oaths of allegiance, and refused military service at the same time as they lived in community service of the poor; the Waldenses, Albigenses, and Franciscans of the Middle Ages, and more recent forms of communal living such as the Tolstoyan colonies, the Hopedale Community, and the Catholic Worker Movement.

The book also presents the attempts of Christian anarchists to deal with the “difficult” passages of the Bible such as Matthew 10: 34–39 wherein Jesus says that “I came not to send peace, but a sword” (which Ellul interprets metaphorically and the others ignore) and Romans 13 wherein Paul decrees obedience to the government writing that the state “powers that be are ordained by God” and “rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil”. Romans 13 marks a dividing point in Christian anarchist thought and approach to the state. While Christian anarchists tend to note that this passage clearly contradicts Paul’s own practice of disobedience to the state and all agree that Paul’s teaching is secondary to that of Jesus, they are still left with the challenge of interpreting the passage. Some (i.e., Hennacy and Tolstoy) dismiss Paul altogether for having begun the historical deviation from Christ’s teaching (culminating in the cooptation and corruption of institutional Christianity under the Roman emperor Constan-

tine in the fourth century). Others (i.e., Day) grant Paul legitimacy especially in light of his comment in Galatians 5 that “there is no law” (150). Redford and Crawford interpret Paul as somewhat ironic and writing in coded language so that Christians can deal with the government pragmatically and not stir more trouble than absolutely necessary. Yet for others such as Yoder, Ellul, Penner, and Chelčický, there are other implications: the state is a regrettable institution sent as punishment for human sins but Christians ought to respect it and turn the other cheek as they would a fellow human being who assaults them. For them, Paul is “reminding Christians of the reasons for the state’s existence, but he is also calling them to patiently endure and forgive this pagan rejection of God” (154). Taking it to an extreme, Eller goes so far as to argue against civil disobedience altogether.

The common ground is the explicit rejection of violent revolutionary politics while acknowledging that obedience to the state does not allow for the breaking of God’s commandments (should a conflict arise between the two sets of authority). A similar approach is given to the “Render unto Caesar” passage in that the state is granted by God a limited domain of control to which the Christian ought to submit but that the vast majority of life falls under God’s exclusive domain.

It is interesting to note that, of those thinkers who self-identity as Christian anarchist, none of them seem to interpret Jesus as legitimizing violent resistance to the state. In fact, according to Christoyannopoulos, the principled commitment to non-violence is at the center of what Christian anarchism is all about and also what most distinguishes it from liberation theology where, according to the author, there tends to be an allowance for the state and the use of violence to pursue the cause of justice, gain control of the state, and steer human history. For Christian anarchists, on the other hand, such a strategy would betray the very message and example of Jesus. The real revolution of sacrifice for our fellow humans was demonstrated when he died on the cross and therefore “what for Christian anarchists remains clearly contradictory to Jesus’ commandments is *violent* resistance” (164). Only through a commitment to non-violence can the cycle of violence be broken.

The real challenge then for Christian anarchists is to build “a new society within the shell of the old” as the Catholic Workers say in borrowing from the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In addition to the principles of forgiveness, non-violence, and so on, it also entails that “wealth should indeed always be

shared freely within and by the Christian community: everything—food, clothes, shelter, property—should be shared” for, as Maurin is quoted, “All the land belongs to God” (178).

In a stylistic sense, this book is a normative study in open advocacy of the idea of Christian anarchism and therefore reads a bit like a combination between an academic study and a lengthy sermon with exegetical commentary on biblical scripture. At the same time, the text is generally accessible and, for the most part, free from overly academic language.

Yet the sermon here is not based on the author’s own interpretations of scripture but on his presentation of various Christian anarchists whose interpretations are woven together in an attempt to provide an outline for single Christian anarchist theory. This intent is made clear for, as the author notes, the book presents “fairly different lines of argument as one, as part of one general and generic thesis” (240). This means that confusion may arise as to what is the author’s personal stance and what is the actual consensus amongst Christian anarchist thinkers. For example, due to the author’s own commitment to the non-violent wing of Christian anarchism, it is difficult to determine to what degree this is representative. After all, the Christian anarchist Taborites and some early Anabaptists clearly advocated violent resistance to the ruling powers. This presents a question for all revolutionaries: Is it possible to advocate violence and coercion to overthrow but not to rule? Hence, this question and the case of non-violence present a challenge for non-Christians as well in terms of what sort of post-state society is being advocated and which methods are realistic for bringing it about.

As it is, such questions are dealt with in the book, but it is not always clear exactly what each thinker believes and even less clear what they actually practice. An alternative structure could have been to present each thinker individually and note the contrasts and similarities between their theories. Instead, the book organizes the text along thematic lines. As there is no attempt to use internal differences to organize the variations of Christian anarchism into sub-categories according to certain criteria (i.e., praxis, stance on violence, denominational origins, etc.), both the challenges and distinctions between these variations become obscured and less apparent to the reader.

Hence, what this book does not necessarily do is provide an overview of Christian anarchism *as such*. While the focus here is admittedly designed to cover no more than theorists (as opposed to activists) and anti-statists (as opposed to pre-state theorists),

this has also entailed that the resulting study presents all the main theorists as white males and some, such as the most cited theorist in the book, Leo Tolstoy, furthermore came from the upper class. Only two women are presented, Dorothy Day and Nekeisha Alexis-Baker, as part of broader categories (the Catholic Worker Movement and “Writers Behind Christian Anarchist Publications” respectively). Alexis-Baker seems to be the only person of color presented. Jesus himself, as a non-writer, pre-state person of color who seemed to have done more bumming around than theorizing, would seem out of place here if it weren’t for the fact that the entire book is based on what are believed to be his teachings.

In my ideal vision of a book on Christian anarchism, it would include older generations of non-white activism such as the revolutionary perspective of Emiliano Zapata as well as the non-violent resistance expressed by Sojourner Truth. It would question the relationship between theory and praxis (as was done so well recently in an article on the homepage of the Jesus Radicals which asks how one might approach John Howard Yoder’s theory of pacifism in light of his informal position of power and the accusations that he repeatedly crossed sexual boundaries with women¹). It would include the newer generation of thinkers and activists from Shane Claiborne (author of *Jesus for President*) to the inspirational Philadelphia-based crust-folk band The Psalters.² It would also include a discussion on the role of education via Ivan Illich (who called Jesus an “anarchist savior” in 1988³). An ideal book on Christian anarchism would address the particular relationship of people and privileges in the wealthier parts of the world to those who endure less power, security, and privilege elsewhere in the world due in part to U.S. and European military domination (thinking here in general of the Plowshare Movement and specifically one of its founders, Phil Berrigan, who spent about 16 of the last 30 years of his life in jail for civil disobedience against the state institutions of war). It would ponder the anarchistic implications of Meister Eckhart’s (c. 1260–c. 1327) radical mysticism and St. Basil the Blessed’s (c. 1468–c. 1552) Robin Hood

¹ Andy Alexis-Baker, “John Howard Yoder and Sex: Wrestling with the Contradictions,” *Jesus Radicals*, May 24, 2012: <http://www.jesusradicals.com/john-howard-yoder-and-sex-wrestling-with-the-contradictions/>.

² The manifesto of the Psalters can be accessed here: <http://psalters.org>.

³ Ivan Illich, “The Educational Enterprise in the Light of the Gospel,” *David Tinapple*, November 15, 1988: http://www.davidtinapple.com/illich/1988_Edual.html.

tactics of stealing goods and distributing to the needy. It would also include an exploration of the difficulties and challenges of espousing Christian anarchism on one hand (such as what the minister Greg Boyd does⁴) while on the other hand succumbing to traditional prejudices toward homosexuals (such as the megachurch that Boyd founded which holds the belief that “God’s ideal for human sexuality is that it be expressed only within the bounds of a monogamous, heterosexual marriage covenant.”⁵) It would examine the teachings of Gerrard Winstanley (1609–c. 1676) and review Raoul Vaneigem’s treatment of Christian heretics in *The Movement of the Free Spirit* (1986). It would address issues of vegetarianism (as espoused by Tolstoy and Hennacy) along with the environmental issues (as approached by Jacques Ellul and the Jesus Radicals). It would investigate the structural practices of groups like the anti-state Doukhobors and the horizontally organized Quakers. It would discuss the historical connections between Christians such as Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, and Thomas J. Hagerty (the priest who co-founded the IWW and drafted its original preamble⁶) and secular syndicalism. It would explore the challenges and lessons gained from decades of living, organizing, and struggling within the confines of Catholic Worker collectives. And, ultimately, in those areas that it covered and did not cover, an ideal book on Christian anarchism would, for me, acknowledge its own social location and how that vision may be skewed coming from that perspective.

Yet despite the fact that this book does not do these things (which, of course, are unrealistic expectations for any book), it ought not to detract from its notable accomplishment of coherently presenting a systematic challenge to dominant (mis)readings of scripture. As such, it can be regarded as both a development of research in Christian anarchism as well as an essential introduction to the topic. Along the way, the path is scattered with little gems such as Dorothy Day’s comment that “we love God as much as we love the person we love the least” and the suggestion that prison can be a form of “new monastery” where Christians can “abide with honor” (177, 163). The vision that

⁴ See, for example, Greg Boyd, “A Call to Christian Anarchy,” *Random Reflections—Greg Boyd*, January 11, 2008: <http://gregboyd.blogspot.com/2008/01/call-to-christian-anarchy.html>.

⁵ See Woodland Hills Church stances here: <http://whchurch.org/about/beliefs/controversial-issues>.

⁶ See IWW Preamble here: <http://www.iww.org/en/culture/official/preamble.shtml>.

seems to arise here is of an ecumenical theology of various types of Christians who all agree that the institutionalized Church departed from Christ's teachings long ago and the way to bring it back is to follow Christ's example by challenging the authorities, sharing amongst one another, and committing oneself to non-violent resistance.

In this way, *Christian Anarchism* succeeds as a general outline of Christian anarchist thought and simultaneously opens up a discussion for both activists and academics about the contents, implications, challenges, and boundaries of this school of thought (and praxis). Regarding the first aspect, its bibliography alone of more than 450 entries provides plenty of resources for future researchers (more than a quarter of the 76 references in the Wikipedia entry on Christian anarchism make reference to this book). Regarding the latter aspect, the limitations of this work may prove just as fruitful as its contents in that they can provoke debate and dialogue as to what really lies at the core of Christian anarchism and indeed, Christianity itself.

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