

Anarchism and Christianity

Jacques Ellul

1980

Contents

I	5
II	8
III	13

That anarchism and Christianity are the most irreconcilable enemies is so established that it seems strange to try to reconcile them. Anarchism's war cry is "neither God nor master." Anarchist thinkers have made anti-Christianity, anti-religion, and anti-theism their fundamental points of doctrine. While one could say that Marx's atheism (or anti-theism) is strictly subordinate since he deals with the question by neglect rather than by intention, the "against God" is of major importance to the anarchism of Proudhon, Kropotkin and Bakunin. True, Marx analyzes religion at length and demonstrates that every revolution must also be waged against religion's particularly alienating form of ideology. Nevertheless, this is not the essential direction of his thought.

On the other hand it is self-evident that Christianity not only respects authorities but also considers authorities to be necessary. Everyone knows that Christianity is a doctrine of order! Certainly Calvin considered any order to be better than anarchy, the most terrifying transformation of a society. For Calvin the worst tyrant would clearly be preferable to the absence of civil powers—a condition in which each would become a wolf towards the other and the sin of each would manifest itself against each and against all, without a single limitation or check. That is, the belief of man as radical sinner completely contradicts the idea of *an-arché*. [Ed. note. *An-arché*, from the Greek *arché* the originating, primal or highest principle of order or authority. *Arché* moved into English in words archaic, architect, archangel, archbishop. The prefix *an*, in Greek and English, indicates a negation or reversal or denial of the primal, originating or highest principle of order or authority. *An-arché* is the absence or overcoming of order or authority. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, anarchism assumed a political reference, indeed, became a political movement, discussed in this article.]

So there is rejection on both sides. For Christianity, a more determined rejection of anarchism than of socialism, whatever its tendency (and I do not have in mind only the idealistic, utopian, romantic socialism that pleased many Christian thinkers so well). Scientific socialism, for example, continues to attract Christians: it too is a doctrine of order and organization. It seeks to attain justice. It cares greatly for the poor. When it speaks of freedom it is a well-regulated freedom. If the idea of the disappearance of the State is entertained by the extremists it's a minor point of doctrine—surely a small manner compared to the great egalitarian transformation that has penetrated fully and easily into the perspective of current Christian thought. The State will become moribund later on, much later on, and so the doctrine of the disappearance of the State is not bothersome to Christians.

Conversely, socialism is ready to accept a host of good qualities in Christianity: love for others, search for justice, service, and the importance placed on a social plan (and not merely an extraterrestrial one). And socialists are ready to recognize Christians as brothers and sisters on the road. "Those who believe in heaven and those who do not believe in it ... ' After all, people can do the same thing together even if they have different faiths. It works for Christians too. It is the theory of "part of the road," caricatured a little: "... since we both desire a society with greater justice, fraternity and equality, let us travel together on the part of the road that leads to it. You see, our faith in God is not bothersome; it has no influence at all on our ideology regarding that society we work toward (which is the same as yours), nor on the political means we use to attain it. We shall part company *afterwards*, when we have achieved our objective, when we are in that society. Then we Christians will reaffirm the importance of faith in Jesus Christ."

It is obvious that this arrangement is impossible between anarchists and Christians. When anarchists make the destruction of religion virtually the centerpiece of the revolution (with-

out which *no* revolution is possible), and the other cannot conceive of a society without pre-established order strictly maintained...well, what can be done?

No doubt the current trend of atheist Christianity makes things easier. If Christians have decided to kill God, one half of the journey is finished. The anarchists have little to add, and should be quite satisfied. The good prophet Jesus, pacifist and defender of the poor, never bothered the anarchists. On the contrary! Christians today not only abandon the hideous dogma of original sin-the radical evil which is in us-but they construct another complete *theology* (if one can call it that). This theology argues that the sole objective of the "God" (so-called, but this "God" does not live) of the Bible is the Kingdom of Humanity-the realization, accomplishment, blossoming of our potential. This fulfillment is what, due to a cultural error, has so far been called the "Kingdom of God".

That done, both parts of the journey are complete. Anarchists can accept Christianity, and Christians can participate in anarchy. The curious thing is that the connection fails to take place. This is because neither Christians nor anarchism are attractive to each other, and because today to be a socialist (or even a Marxist) and a Christian raises few if any eyebrows (at least in France). Today no one thinks of conjoining anarchism and Christianity.

I think there is a small complementary obstacle: for anarchism there is still the Church. Although this is not a bothersome factor in the relationship between Christians and socialists (one institution always gets along with another institution; church and party: the same thing), here it is a "nonconforming good". [tr "*obstacle redhibitoire*", " a legal term meaning a taint in a product which renders the sale null and void.] It is true that some Christians are ready to make even this small sacrifice. And we know that an important faction is doing everything it can to destroy the Church by demonstrating that the Church is a wart on early Christianity which, along the way, it deformed totally. But this is not sufficient to reassure and convince the anarchists. It takes a long time for a judgement like this to penetrate the mass audiences.

Christians see a much greater obstacle: politics. The Christians who are engaged in the theological overhaul to which we have alluded are politically Leftist, even extreme Left. But they do not really know what anarchism is. About twenty years ago, a sociologist who was making a survey of the political leanings of French Protestants and who knew perfectly well that I was an anarchist classified me as a Rightist, not far from the monarchists for that very reason. To the "good" Left of the Marxists, anarchists are false brothers, dreamers, unscientific people. Indeed, Marx condemned Proudhon and Bakunin. Anarchists are Rightists because they hold freedom as their pivotal imperative (freedom being the virtue of the Right in France, perhaps elsewhere, since 1945). Anarchism has gilded its coat-of-arms somewhat only to fall into Leftism and thus be condemned by the serious Left. *Organization* is the mark of the serious Leftist; it is the coherent tactic, which presupposes a chain of commands. It is efficiency. How could Leftist Christians not accept these criteria? Whereas anarchists ... No, disorder cannot suit Christians, for how ' does one separate anarchy from disorder? Thus, rejected by both traditional and Leftist Christians anarchism remains without any relationship to Christianity.

With the Christian abandonment of God, the Personal God, with their reduction of Jesus to a historical model of humanity, with the advent of the reign of Humanity, with their expansion of humanity's power and the suppression of the church, the final desolating thing is that nothing is left of Christianity but the name of Jesus. I shall not engage here in a theological debate on this affair. My refusal is not due to any kind of traditionalism on my part. It is due to a lack of seriousness on the part of those theologians who literally will say anything just to be in fashion.

In what follows I would like to sketch another mode of rapprochement between anarchism and Christianity which I believe will abandon none of the biblical message. On the contrary, it seems to me that biblical thought leads directly to anarchism, and that this is the only “political anti-political” position in accord with Christian thinking.

I

One must first try to account for the critique against Christianity, religion and the church brought by the anarchists of the nineteenth century (resumed by twentieth century anarchists without being either renewed or enriched!). Bakunin best summarized the question in his book *God and the State*:

...God being everything, man and the real world are nothing. God being truth, justice, the good, beauty, power, life, man is the lie, iniquity, evil, ugliness, impotence and death. God being master, man is slave. Incapable of finding justice, truth and eternal life by himself, man can do so only by divine revelation. But he who speaks of revelation speaks of revealers...who will be recognized as God's representatives on earth ... and who of necessity exercise absolute power. All men owe them passive and unlimited obedience, for no terrestrial justice can prevail against divine reason. God's slaves, men are also slaves to the church and to the state insofar as the state is consecrated by the church ... Christianity has understood and realized this better than all other religions. That is why Christianity is the absolute religion, and the Roman Church the only consistent and logical one.

[Excursus: One clearly sees here the point at which Bakunin is influenced by his cultural environment. What he reconstructs as a deduction from the general to the particular is in fact the fruit of a completely inverted process: the Roman Church is the support of the State. He argues that it is the most authoritarian and anti-liberal structure ever: this is what he gathers from history. He calls on history to prove the accuracy of what he says about God. Therefore Christianity (of which Catholicism represents the extreme) is authoritarian and anti-liberal; and so are all religions, of which Christianity is the most evident. And from thence he passes to the Religion, and finally to what is the object of religions: God who is the authoritarian master and the inspiration of the whole... That is the development of Bakunin's reasoning, which he inverts to make it philosophical and justifiable.]

...The idea of God implies the abdication of reason and of human justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty and necessarily borders on man's slavery in theory as well as practice...

If God exists, man is a slave. Yet man can and must be free. Therefore God does not exist. I defy anyone to get out of this circle ... The contradiction is: they (Christians) want God *and* humanity. They obstinately insist on combining two terms which, once separated, can never meet again without destroying each other. In one breath they say “God-and-man's-freedom, God and dignity, justice, equality, fraternity, men's prosperity” without caring about the fatal logic by virtue of which God is of necessity the eternal, supreme, absolute master if He exists, and man is slave. Yet if man is slave, neither justice, equality, fraternity nor prosperity are possible. They

insist, contrary to good sense and to all historical experiences, in depicting their God as animated by the tenderest love for human freedom. A master, no matter what he does and no matter how liberal he shows himself to be, is no less a master. His very existence necessarily implies the slavery of all who find themselves subservient to him. Therefore, if God existed he would have only one means to serve human freedom; to cease to exist. Loving human freedom, jealous for it, and considering it to be the absolute condition for all we adore and respect in humanity, we quote Voltaire and say, "If God existed, he would have to be abolished."

[Excursus: I must be precise and state that when I speak here of anarchism I refer mainly to the anarchism of the great classics, but also to the active groups of the Jura Mountain Federation and to anarcho-syndicalism. I do not refer to mutualism, a rather deviant branch of anarchism. I don't wish to reject the nihilists and the violent anarchists, but they pose a complementary (not central) problem in the relationship between Christianity and anarchism. The problem of violence is essentially a problem of means, not of the focal point of the question: an-arche, the absence of authority.]

To this there should be added of course all the texts of Proudhon on authority (God being the one on whom all authorities rest) on the formula of laws copied from the Decalogue (containing the general idea of the revolution) and on the Church's role denying the freedom of inquiry. On the other hand, the entire scientific position taken by the anarchists of the second half of the nineteenth century should also be taken into account. They sought to prove the non-existence of God, beginning with the developments in science. (For example S. Faure, R. Reclus.)

But all this is relatively unimportant. What strikes me in this anarchist affirmation against God, religion and Church is its circumstantial, dated character. It seems to me that their reproaches and attacks are tied to precise events in the history of Christianity. At the center of Christian theology is the confession of God. Since the thirteenth century many Christian theologians have insisted on the attributes of God's power. God is, above all and exclusively, the All-Powerful, the King, the Absolute Autocrat, the radical Judge, the terrible One. When anarchism declares, "neither God nor master", this God is the target. He is in effect the one who precludes human freedom: we are but toys in God's hands; we have no possibility to be; we are damned a priori. One can understand that a doctrine which affirms humanity's dignity cannot accept that. In the final analysis, it is the Creator who not only is at the beginning but who regulates everything, who distributes both the good and the bad, misfortunes and blessings.

It is very strange that the Biblical God, the God of Jesus Christ, could have been so deformed. Jesus, who claims kinship with Yahweh chose the life of non-power, radically so. The God of Jesus chose to be revealed to the world by an incarnation in the infant in Bethlehem's stables. So the definition of the biblical God's incarnation in our time and space, our history, is love. From the Exodus, the action of this biblical God is liberation: God is above all and foremost our liberator. If God condemns sin and the powers of evil, it is because they are alien to us. In the Old Testament, where the power of God is often stark, this power is never, never mentioned alone: every proclamation of power is associated with and often encompassed by a proclamation of love and of pardon, an exhortation to reconciliation, and an affirmation that this power of God works in our favor, never against us. It is as false to present the biblical God as the All-Powerful One as it is to paint God as an old bearded gentleman sitting on clouds. Yet when I say this I refuse to go through the same shennanigans of the death-of-God theologians, who annul ninety-nine

percent of the biblical text which, cultural or not, does not cease speaking primarily of God. It is God's life, not our experience, which is the center of the Biblical message. I restrict myself here to rehabilitating the Biblical text from a classic theological distortion.

I shall not spend much time on a second point: the confusion between religion and revelation, or between religion and Christian faith. All that is becoming known well enough. It is quite true that the anarchist critics of religion ("opium of the people," etc ... Marx's formula, which was much more strongly presented by the anarchists) are accurate about *religion*. But they fail to touch the essentials of the Christian faith.

Thirdly, it is accurate to say that in Christianity, 'in its *historical* expression of religion the All-Powerful God-became the support of established order. Here again we encounter an extreme deviation, due in part to the institutionalization of the Church, which ceases to be the assembly of the faithful, of people united by the sole tie of love and becomes instead 'organization" and consequently "power." This deviation is also due in pan to dogma becoming dogmatism. It is a problem at hardening on both sides. Truth possessed (which thereby ceases to be truth) leads to judgment and condemnation. Love institutionalized produces authority and hierarchy. And although the Church was no doubt once a happy and joyous consequence for people who-assured of their salvation-united to manifest God's love, it became a structure possessing authority and truth and claims to represent God's power on earth. "No salvation outside the Church" means, first, that all those who acknowledge being saved by Jesus Christ assemble to return thanks (that is, outside of Him there are no people who live their faith!). This then comes to mean that all those who are outside the structure of the Church are damned! A grave inversion.

Finally it is quite true that the Church became the support of the establishment, of political powers and of social organizations. We all know those points when the Church turns coat time and again to accomodate the reigning authority and to become the strongest ally of any government-provided that that government has become legitimate in the judgment of the world. While this was not *always* true, it is true more often than. not. One also knows the monstrous uses made of Christianity by the bourgeoisie to maintain the social order and to keep the workers subjugated.

All these errors, deformations, heresies (oh yes! heresies!) and deviations bordering on anti-Christianity have always existed as ways to interpret biblical revelation. They were accentuated after the Reformation, and became dominant in the eighteenth century. In other words, the dominant event is the bourgeoisie's transformation of theology, Church and Church-society relationship. The anarchists' attacks on God, the Church and religion are strictly correct, on condition that the God in question was the God remodeled by this very particular theology of Church-became-Power. and by the peculiar and capricious association of Church and social and political power following the sixteenth century. This theology to support this Church-State relationship is in no way an expression of biblical Christianity: indeed it is a contradiction. The roots are, rather, time after time in the theological heresy of a God conceived exclusively as the All-Powerful. The error of the anarchists and of Marx was to believe that they were face to face with Christianity itself, whereas they encountered merely its bourgeois metamorphosis. By adhering to this judgment they have overvalued those very features-be they in the early Church or during the Middle Ages-which confirm their point of view, instead of considering them only one among many other possibilities. For example, the death of Ananias and Sapphira are evidence that the apostles were terrible dictators. The 10quisition became the symbol for the medieval church. The construction of cathedrals was seen as the symbol for the enslavement of poor people crushed by the clergy.

Everything that was real regarding love and joy and Christian freedom the anarchists overlooked, joyfully. In other words, the anarchists-justly fighting against the Christian totalitarianism and authoritarianism of the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries-had a totally false view of the fundamental reality of Christianity and the God of Jesus Christ. Our task now is to rectify this anarchist error.

The absence of God, atheism, is in no way an essential condition of anarchism. The presence of the God of Jesus Christ is the essential condition for the deliverance of humanity. Negating and banishing the God of Jesus Christ is the failure of all of our so-called liberating revolutions, which each time ends with greater enslavement. When left to ourselves and not given a manifestation of freedom, an experience of freedom, and a point of departure for freedom which radically transcends us, we inevitably produce our own slavery. Freedom conquered by humanity becoming absolute is the ineluctable establishment of dictatorship. Only when we are related-that is, relative, not claiming equality to the Transcendent, are we truly human. Only then are we bestowed the gift of freedom which relatives all our pretensions and therefore our efforts to dominate each other. But being relative, that is, human, cannot occur unless we meet the Eternal not on our terms but on the terms of the Eternal. We can never, in other words, make ourselves 'relative' to the Transcendent so long as we insist on the absolute proclamation of Our Kingdom. We receive our humanity from the Transcendent, freeing love of the God of Jesus Christ. We shall return to this point in our final section.

The deviation from Christianity gave the anarchists an opportunity for an accurate and telling critique. But they never understood that their attack was against a deviation, not the reality (even though sometimes a *lived* reality!) or the truth of the biblical revelation. Rather, they challenged a socio-theological formulation of God and not the God of the Bible and of Jesus Christ. I maintain that there is the God of the Bible and of Jesus Christ.

II

We must now examine the other side. We begin with the biblical data. What does the Old Testament teach about political power?

On the one hand, political power per se is *always* contested referring to Nations. The regular theme is: these kings, they are gods, idols. They will be destroyed as testimony to their weakness. At the time of the Babylonian captivity, for example, when the prophets say that the people of Israel should work for the good of the society in which they now find themselves, there was no question of supporting the king of Babylon. The kings of Assyria and Egypt are considered instruments manifesting God's wrath; they themselves have no legitimacy whatsoever. Elisha is sent to anoint the new king of Syria; this means only that this king will be God's scourge to chastise Israel. This king in no way profits from any alliance with or support from Elisha. (Cf. my *Politics of God, Politics of Man.*) Never does the government of a foreign people appear legitimate or salutary. At best the government is a necessity. There is no alternative. The only relation to political authorities is that of conflict. Nothing but persecution, war, devastation, famine and evil can be expected from these kings. Joseph and Daniel are the only two examples of collaboration between a representative of Israel and these foreign kings. But one should not forget that Joseph, who draws his brothers into Egypt, has by his success produced only the slavery of the whole of Israel! (It doesn't matter if the facts are accurate! We are studying here only the way Israel

depicts political authority in Scripture. The complete evolution must be considered: it is only after receiving a “favor” or after a temporary “alliance” that Israel is inevitably led into slavery, domination and ruin).

The second example is Daniel. (The same observation obtains: it doesn’t matter if Daniel never existed and that the story is pure fiction: indeed that would make the narrative even more illustrative!) Daniel, great visionary and interpreter of dreams is in favor of Nebuchadnezzar, but the hazards of such favor are known: because he does not bow before the king on the subject of faith, he is thrown into the fiery furnace (authority must make itself adored!).

[Excursus: It must also be noted that Joseph, as well as Daniel, has been called into the presence of authority for very ambiguous reasons: both are the king’s diviners. The authority considers them to have a relation to a mysterious power (and not at all to the truth) and so considers them to be capable of enlightening political authority through magic and sorcery. In other words, God’s gift is monopolized and transformed into its opposite. Political authority cannot recognize the true God for what He is. [t can only use Him accidentally for its own reinforcement. What a strange spotlight on the alliance between Church and State in the modern era.]

Darius throws him into the lion’s pit: authority is indeed dangerous and devouring. To participate in political action and reflection on the governmental level is an enterprise which necessarily endangers true faith, and otherwise can lead only to the proclamation of the end of political authority, to its destruction. One must not forget that Daniel prophesied nothing but misfortune to the various kings he served. To each he announced the end of the reign, the destruction of the kingdom, the death of the king, etc. Consequently, Daniel is the negator of authority even while serving that authority temporarily.

One could say that all this can be explained by the fact that the people in question are “Nations”-enemies of Israel, peoples not elected by God, pagans and idolaters-and that Israel’s wholly negative judgment on these authorities was an obvious one.

So we must now examine the monarchy in Israel. I have written about the significance of the monarchy (Cf. particularly, “La conception du pouvoir en Israel,” in *Melanges en l’honneur de M. Brethes de la Gressaye* (1968).) Not to repeat this study, I shall indicate the main outlines and conclusions.

The principal text is certainly the institution of the monarchy in I Samuel 8. Prior to these events Israel was a people without political organization, “governed directly by God.” Whenever necessary, God sent a “judge” as a temporary, charismatic, occasional chief. But Israel demanded organization, a political authority, a king in order to become more efficient, *to be more like other peoples* who had kings. Samuel fights longtime to prevent this treason against God. But God ends up giving in to His people’s disobedience, declaring, “By giving themselves a king they have rejected me.” The recital is very detailed and complex, but it can be broken down into three component parts: political authority rests on defiance; it is a rejection of God; it can only be dictatorial, abusive and unjust (Cf. II Samuel 8:10–18).

Political authority is established in Israel in conformity with and imitation of the surrounding environment. The first king is Saul, the mad, the delirious king. God, by His grace and as an exception, chooses David to succeed Saul, and makes David His representative. But this is a single ray of light attesting to the fact that God can draw miraculous good from human evil, for Solomon, admirably suited for exercising power, ends by being radically corrupted by power. His accumulation of riches and women, his construction of independent political power, his creation of cities, etc.. are considered the normal components of political authority. But they are also

elements of Solomon's alienation from God and they finally produce his rejection, with clear indications that it was the exercise of political power that corrupted this man who was originally so wise, good and humble.

Finally, two distinctive features must be mentioned. The Chronicles' account of the succession of the kings of Israel and Judea give a very strange evaluation of authority. All those kings who, according to objective history, were "great" kings are systematically (and I insist on this *systematically*: it is indeed the sense of the evaluation of political authority, even more significant if it does not correspond to the facts!) presented in the Biblical account as bad kings: idolatrous, unjust, tyrannical, murderous. These were the kings who set up better organization, made conquests and enriched the people. In other words, they exercised their power *normally*. The judgment of "good" kings is reserved for those who, historically, were weak, lost their wars, were bad administrators, lost their wealth". This could signify either that the only authority one can in the end accept is the weakest authority. or that if a statesman is faithful to God he is necessarily a bad statesman and *vice versa*. The consistency of these biblical judgments is too great to be anything but extraordinary, indeed unique. No nation in the world has produced a single chronicle or historiography expressing this orientation. Rather, it is always the successful king who is everywhere rated great and legitimate.

A final brief comment: detailed analysis of the coronation procedures and of the names used to designate the kings demonstrates that the king is never anything but the acting, temporary and accidental sign for the One who is to come. He is defined by this "co come". The king in coronation festivities has no importance. He is merely a surveying stake, a stone placed in a waiting position. God delivers political authority to the degree that it is the preliminary image of the ultimate perfection of the Messiah and of the kingdom. Political authority never has any value in and of itself. On the contrary, it is even denied, challenged and condemned on each occasion it claims to exist either as political authority or anything else other than a sign of the One to come. Political authority, in other words, has no other value than that which it draws from what is to come (an event that will come!) and what it signifies (which is unknown!) There is no validation of political power whatsoever in the Old Testament. On the contrary, it is forever contested.

In the New Testament, two lines of thought can be seen: one favorable to authority (represented by the famous text from Paul: "there is no authority except from God": Romans 13:1), and the other, much larger one, hostile to authority and represented by the Gospels and Revelation. It is very strange that, since Constantine, the Church has, in an almost redundant fashion, based its "theology of the state" on Romans thirteen and the parallel texts from the Perrine Epistles.

Jesus' attitude towards political authority in the Gospels is a radically negative one. He himself refuses to exercise <juridical type of authority. He counsels his disciples not to imitate the kings of nations ("kings and governors have dominion over men; let there be none like that among you ..."). He refuses to become king or to participate in the political conflicts of history. It is very significant, in this regard, that there were both Roman "collaborators" (Matthew) and Zealots, the violent anti-Roman patriots (Judas, Simon) among his disciples. He knew quite well the resistance party and refused to join it. He held political authority up to derision. Consider the famous and interesting affair of the two coins found in the mouth of a fish, an occasion to talk about tax. This is the sale and unique miracle of this type, bordering on the exorbitant, done precisely to demonstrate that the duty of paying taxes is simply ridiculous I He submits himself to Caesar's

jurisdiction, giving not one hint of recognition to Caesar's legitimacy. Caesar's is the jurisdiction of power, nothing more.

Two points need to be refined: the famous saying, "Render to Caesar..." in no way divides the exercise of authority into two realms. It is incredible to draw from these words the notion that heaven, the spiritual, the emotions, are God's realm, but that Caesar is wholly qualified to exercise authority over people and things in this world. Jesus' words mean no such thing. They were said in response to another matter: the payment of taxes, and the coin. The mark on the coin is that of Caesar; it is the mark of his property. Therefore give Caesar this money; it is his. It is not a question of legitimizing taxes! It means that Caesar, having created money, is its master. That's all. (Let us not forget that money for Jesus is the domain of Mammon, a satanic domain!) As for "...that which is God's..." : how could a pious Jew in Jesus' time possibly understand "that which is God's" in any way but *everything*? God is the Creator, the master of life and death, the one on whom everything depends. The phrase means: Caesar is legitimate master of nothing but what he fabricates for himself, and that is the province of demons!

As for the other formulation, "My kingdom is not of this world": this says explicitly that Jesus will not exercise political authority. But in no way does it suggest that Jesus recognizes the validity of political authority. On the contrary. There is the kingdom of God, and all authority exercised outside of that is wicked and must be denied. Nevertheless, Jesus does not represent apoliticism or spiritualism. His is a fundamental attack on political authority. It is not indifference concerning what politics can be or can do. It is a *refusal* of politics. Jesus is not a tender dreamer gliding in the sky "above politics." He challenges every attempt to validate the political realm, and rejects its authority because it does not conform to the will of God. Indeed, this is given precise confirmation by the account of the Temptations. The third temptation in Matthew's account is the one in which the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world and tells him, "I will give you all these things if you prostrate yourself and adore me." Jesus responds with a refusal to adore him.

[Excursus: I am in complete disagreement with the exegetes who wish to reduce this text to the problem of adoration: that is, what Jesus rejects is not political power but adoration of Satan...The text is clear: Jesus does not shatter the rapport between authority and adoration. He implicitly admits that if he would adore Satan, Satan would give him all the kingdoms of the earth. Consequently he does not challenge the satanic character of authority.]

He does not refute what Satan says. He does not tell him that these kingdoms and political authorities are not Satan's. No. On the contrary, he is in implicit agreement. Satan can give political authority but the condition for exercising political authority is adoration of the power of evil. *That* is the consistent and unique teaching of the Gospels.

This point is carried to its ultimate conclusion in the book of *Revelation*. [Cf. my commentary *Apocalypse* (The Seabuty Press: 1977).] Here political authority (temporarily represented by Rome, although *Revelation* envisions not only the Roman Empire) is the monster that rises from the sea and perfectly symbolizes political propaganda. But political authority is also represented at the beginning of *Revelation*, with the red knight who holds the sword (his sole function is to wage war, exercise power and kill) and, at the end of the book, with Babylon, which at one and the same time concentrates political and financial power and the administration of the city. We encounter here a consistent line in the Scriptures of the negation of political authority and testimony to the fact that it has neither validity nor legitimacy.

[Excursus: I want to emphasize the fact that the lesson given in this collection of texts is not a situational one. The first Christians did not express their anti-politics, their anarchism, because they were persecuted by or opposed by political authorities. Theirs was a fundamental stance. Everything is from the beginning centered on the fact that two political authorities combined to crucify Jesus. How better express the radicalism of their opposition! If, however, One maintains that these stances are simply the responses of the first century Christians to their' 'situation in the Roman Empire"-and nothing more than that-then everything in the Gospels and in the life of Jesus must be considered situational! For example, his teaching On the Law, or the Parables On the Kingdom, etc., is strictly speaking situational all And the New Testament-indeed the whole of Scripture-is reduced to a guide-book of ideology and political propaganda, not the Herald of Good News (the Gospel) for everyone, Christ and Caesar alike.]

In opposition to this, we have the texts of Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome and parallel texts in the New Testament. But among the latter, we must distinguish between those texts which speak only of praying for authorities (a service to render to them, perhaps linked to the problem of *exousiai*, to prevent them from falling into the hands of demons) and the authorities which demand obedience and submission. At any event, the only text which seems to offer an over-all basis for submission to authorities is precisely Paul's letter to the Christians in Rome, specifically the early verses of Chapter Thirteen. These passages, like so many of his writings, seem to me to be Paul's answer to a particular circumstance faced by the congregation of Christians in Rome. (We are reminded of the circumstances confronting Paul with the congregation in Corinth: eating meat sacrificed to idols, virginity, etc.) Of course, these texts from Paul, even though they are occasional, must be seen as bearers of a word of God. But not in a literal way, certainly not as Paul writes to the Christians in Rome in Chapter 13.

It seems to me that these verses should be placed in the milieu which I have already described. Specifically: what is the common attitude of the Christians of the first generation. To reject political authority (not merely the' 'worship" demanded of Caesar) immediately leads to the refusal, for example, of military service. Paul's verses seem to me a reaction against the extremist of the anti-political position, against *an-arché*. Paul says "Don't exaggerate, don't take refusal to extremes. For authority ultimately comes from God who has *reduced* the magistrate to the role of servant, even if the magistrate continues the claim as master."

The good in society. Paul is saying, is certainly not God's word. All the same, it is not negligible... and it is guaranteed by the Judge. Consequently, these words from Paul do not seem' to me to offer a basis for' 'a universal theology of political power" granted them in the history of the Church. Rather, these texts seem to be warning against the excesses of Christian freedom concerning political power. The Christian, Paul is saying, does not seek the suppression of all power in all societies-granted the Christian is free, independent and critical of political power. The Christian must always proclaim the limited duty of political power-never accepting it as a divine institution, but also never judging it, as was done in Paul's time, as solely the work of the devil! Granted that his words are in the context of a specific situation (Christians in Rome in the first century), Paul gives us an orientation about the ethics of freedom which remains valid, but not as a theological foundation of political power. Specifically, we know there was in the Christian congregations rejection of military or any service to the Empire. It seems to me important that Paul does not mention this opposition in these texts to the Christians in Rome when he writes about political authority. Instead, he grants that Caesar (the magistrate) holds the sword. But he refuses to say that Christians must or as Christians are able to hold the sword. To me, this

means that the obedience Paul recommends to political authorities does not go so far as bearing the sword of the magistrate. That is, Paul accepts the general opinion of the Church.

Moreover, to this interpretation of Paul in Romans Thirteen. we must add the reminders which K. Barth and F.J. Leenhardt have offered. The notorious verses of Romans 13 must be read in the context of the letter of Paul to the Christians in Rome. That is, in chapter twelve, Paul speaks of love, and gives in succession a number of applications. He closes the chapter speaking of love for one's enemies (if your enemy is hungry, feed him, etc.,) and immediately after the seven verses on authorities that open chapter thirteen, Paul returns again to the theme of love, showing how love contains all the commandments. Then he digresses about the end of time (13: 11-14) and returns to love in chapter fourteen when he speaks of tolerance of the weak. That is, the verses on authorities are included in his teaching on love. I would go so far as to summarize them this way: "Love your enemies. Naturally, we all believe that the authorities are our enemies, however, we must also love them." But as in each case that he studies (the Church, joy, enemies. the law, the weak in faith, etc.) he gives a specific reason for this love of the other, he does the same thing for the authorities and it is in this perspective that he writes the famous 'there is no authority except from God.' Incidentally, Paul's negative formulation should be stressed, and not the formulation which has later been given: *omnis potestas a Deo* (all power comes from God) which seems to express a principle I Paul is not expressing a principle. Therefore, this text, in my opinion, should be reduced to what it is. that is, not the last word on the question of political authority. but an attempt to apply love in a Christian setting in which the authorities were hated.

III

Thus what one can draw from both the New and the Old Testaments is a fundamental challenge wall political authority. There is no legitimate political authority' as such. Political authority and organization are necessities of *social life* but *nothing more than necessities*. They are constantly tempted to take the place of God, for the magistrate or king infallibly regards themselves as authority *per se*. This power must be contested, denied and constantly challenged. It becomes acceptable only when it stays within its humble status, when it is weak, when it serves the good (which is extremely rare) and truly transforms itself into the servant of humanity (since it is already the servant of God!). But the customary judgment that .the State is legitimate only when it is not tyrannical, unjust, violent, etc. is thereby reversed. In reality the State is illegitimate and must be destroyed unless it is the servant of all-and truly so, not just as a rhetorical image! — and effectively protect the good of all.

In this brief essay, I cannot run through the evidence that documents the complete reversal of the biblical testimony by the Church in history. Anyway, that's wellknown. That aside, the fact is that the characteristic biblical teaching has never disappeared in the Church, and this can be documented. res. the Church, transformed into a Power, taught the contrary. But throughout the history of the Church movements have appeared that we ought to realize as anarchistic because, beginning with the anchorites and up to Tolstoy and Berdyaev, they have reaffirmed the *impossibility* of the State in a variety of ways. No doubt these movements seemed bizarre and were considered so especially by the Church. But they all witnessed to a profound truth about Christianity (sometimes by heresies exacerbated by the Church's opposition): as anarchists they were not the capricious protestors against this and that specific authority or this and that

particular political corruption. Rather, they were the representatives of the reaching and even of the word of God.

Berdyayev seems to have been the last (*On The Slavery and the Freedom of Man*, 1938; *The Realm of the Spirit and the Realm of Caesar*, 1946) to show the incompatibility between the Gospel and the State. He demonstrates the opposition between the ethics of the Gospel and the ethics of the State's power: when it is a choice between serving the State or refusing it, then the State proclaims an ethics that is clearly contrary to the Gospel. Berdyayev shows the opposition between responsibility (the center of the Christian life in the world) and power. He underlines the corruption provoked by political power. He accepts the well-known formula: "Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely." The State's salvation and prosperity does not represent the collective and still less humanity's salvation and prosperity—such an identification is an abominable falsehood. Instead, the State's prosperity always implies the death of innocents. "The law of the State is that in order to save the State even the innocent must be sacrificed...The death of a single man from among the least of men is an event more important and more tragic than the death of a State or an Empire. It is unlikely that God notices the death of the greatest kingdoms, but the death of one man does not escape him..." So Berdyayev.

The connections between Church and State are one form of the relation of Christ's spirit to Caesar. But Jesus Christ has put us against the wall and we must choose, not try to be reasonable, or conciliate! The Church time and again has committed treason in relation to the State. Becoming partner to the State it has turned the State into another Church. Christianity's sin in history is to have recognized and accepted the State, no matter what form that State took and no matter who the incumbent authority. "Recognition of the divine authority of the king is transformed into recognition of the divine authority of the people, later into the authority of the proletariat. Sovereignty and the divine character of power exist in equality!" "It is the sovereignty of the State that must be denied." So Berdyayev.

I have written more than once that there is no fixed Christian position on political power. In reality, the sole political Christian position conforms to Revelation: the negation of power, the total, radical refusal to accept its existence, and the fundamental contesting of whatever form it takes. And I do not say this because of an orientation towards a kind of Spiritualism, or an ignorance of politics, an apoliticism. Certainly not the contrary. As a Christian one must participate in the world of politics and of action. But one must do so to reject it, to confront it with the conscientious and well-founded refusal that alone can put into question, or even prevent, the unchecked growth of power. Thus Christians cannot help but be only on the side of anarchists.

But then, do Christians bring something peculiar to this partnership? Something specific? Are Christians like the others, or do they—like the anarchists—have a particular service to render? In effect, it seems to me that Christians have an important role to play here, on three different levels. First of all, anarchists live in illusion because they think it is possible to effectively abolish authority and to eliminate successfully all the sources of power. They fight to win, to prevail. Christians should be more realistic. We live in a world which has always been subjugated by power in one way or another. I know quite well that this is not a sufficient argument. One can always begin a new epoch, it is not necessary to believe that what has always been will always be. Right. But it is a leap into the unknown. We can no longer believe today the absolute article of the anarchist creed of the past: the inevitability of progress. There is no necessary movement from an inferior to a superior form of society. Nowhere is anarchism, the society of the free, guaranteed. There is every chance that it will never be established. But then the anarchist, when told this,

Stops in discouragement and says, "Well, then what's the use?" This is the point the Christian should intervene. When measured against the grace of God, all human action is strictly relative. Nevertheless, humans must act-not for absolute success (which can only occur in the Kingdom of God) but because love expresses itself in the relative. "If you have been faithful in the small things, I shall give you the large ones." That is the promise given to us.

But one must also understand that the love of man and woman, for example does not reside in the grand, spectacular, ceremonial declarations, or in the magnificent gestures, or in the erotic paroxysms, but rather in the thousands of humble signs of concern for the other that quintessentially express the truth that thou counts for more than I. Therefore, we must not be discouraged if our anarchist affirmations do not lead to the anarchist society, do not upset society, do not destroy all structures. And that too would be a manifestation of power which could only lead to a very specific restructuring of the authority of power.

What does all this mean? Simply this: political authority in its essence tends to grow indefinitely. It has no reason at all to limit itself. No constitution, no ethics, can prevent political power from becoming totalitarian. It must encounter, outside itself, a radical negation based on the opposition of those intending neither to conquer authority (and so undertake political activity) nor to exercise it for the good of others (and so be politics). It must be those representing an intransigent moral conscience and an effective force of opposition. The permanent struggle of this group-which is not a class, not organized in advance, not a sociological entity-is itself the Struggle for the freedom of others. There is freedom only with the winning of freedom. No authority can grant freedom to us. Challenging power is the only means to bring about the realization of freedom. Freedom exists only to the extent that this rejection of power is strong enough, and to the extent one does not allow oneself to be seduced by the idea that surely freedom will come tomorrow if... No. There is No Tomorrow. Freedom exists Today or never. It exists when we shake an edifice, produce a fissure, a gap in the structure where for one moment we can find our always menaced freedom. But to obtain even a small amount of free play in the interior of the system one must manifest total and radical rejection. Every concession to power permits the totality of power to rush in. That is why the anarchistic position is conceivable. It maintains this free play which permits freedom. But we cannot delude ourselves with the vain hope of completely destroying this power and of reconstructing an ideal and fraternal society ... the day after tomorrow!

I already know the anarchist's disillusioned words, "So that's all it is! Only that." Yes! "That's all." That is to say that, today, by our refusal, we will not permit the crack to be totally refilled so that we can still breathe free air. It is the passage from the anarchists disdainful "only that" to the "that's all" full of hope which the Christian should allow the anarchist to realize.

There is a second role Christians can play at the anarchists' side. For most anarchists, people are by nature good and are corrupted only by society or rather by power. If (here be criminals, it is the State's fault. It would seem necessary to believe in this original goodness of humanity in order to have hopes of installing an anarchist society. We must spontaneously act for the good of all, we must not seek to encroach on the territory or freedom of our neighbor, we must discipline our passions and our fury, we must be willing to work voluntarily for the collective, we must not disturb the peace ... otherwise anarchy would be what it is accused of being: simply a disorder, a frightful war of individuals. As far as I know, Bakunin is the only anarchist who had the courage to pose the hypothesis that we are evil, and he drew from it consequences that are critical to his plan for the organization of society.

But one must take a further step. One must admit that not only can there be people occasionally who are nor able to live in anarchy, but, on the contrary, that we are normally unable to do so. One must stare from this reality, and here Christians should be the most realistic. It is not power that leads the subject to wickedness. It is ourselves who want to be slaves and thus rid ourselves of the difficulty of living and turn to authority. In so doing we encounter the appetite for power in the other. The desire to abandon oneself and the will to power are exact corollaries. It is in this setting of reality that anarchism should be proclaimed. Again it is their word of hope: “nevertheless, in spite of” “In spite of this reality about people, we want to destroy power.” Here is the Christian hope in politics.

Assuredly this is not sufficient. That is, when face to face with the evil which is in us-not the moral transgressions of disobeying current morality, but the evil which is a sickness unto death and which leads us to be slave and tyrant-there are only two options. Either one organizes a repressive system which puts everyone in place, which establishes patterns and norms of behavior, which punishes anyone who oversteps the boundary of the small amount of freedom doled out. (That is, the justification for the power of the State.) Or, one works to transform humanity-the Christian would say conversion-in such a way that renders us able to live with others and serve others as an expression of freedom. That is the expression of Christian love, of the love of God for us manifested in Jesus Christ.

Anarchists have clearly seen the necessity for such a transformation. They hoped to achieve it through education, through pedagogy, but that is clearly not enough. The anarcho-syndicalists hoped to achieve it through battle: the human qualities of virtue, courage, solidarity and loyalty are forged in combat against authority-a battle to be waged with the weapons of truth, justice, authenticity (and I would easily add non-violence). Without these weapons one perverts the fighter and fails to prepare him to enter the anarchist fraternity.

Yes. But there is need for a more profound motivation. These two pedagogical methods need to root themselves in a more fundamental truth. A more essential conversion is needed, from which all the rest becomes possible, and which permits us to be courageous despite all the setbacks.

This is precisely where the work of the Gospel is found for the anarchists: the Gospel’s witness that there is a possibility for freedom-just where the most amorphous, servile of us, or the most tyrannical, victorious of us-seem to be immune to any change of any kind. For we too, slave and tyrant, are loved by God in Jesus Christ and are not outside the possibility of living in the truth God -discloses before us. I believe that this contribution of the Christian faith is essential to anarchism, for it reveals a unity in practice along with a conformation in theory.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Jacques Ellul
Anarchism and Christianity
1980

Retrieved on 4th May 2021 from www.jesusradicals.com
Published in *Katallagete* 7, no. 3 (Fall 1980): 14–24.

theanarchistlibrary.org