

An Introduction to Christian Anarchism

An Interview with Dr. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos

Alexandre Christoyannopoulos

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For people who are not familiar, what is a basic definition of Christian Anarchism?

Leo Tolstoy said that “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.” The basic idea behind Christian anarchism is that when it comes to politics, “anarchism” is what follows (or is supposed to follow) from “Christianity”. “Anarchism” here can mean, for example, a denunciation of the state (because through it we are violent, we commit idolatry, and so on), the envisioning of a stateless society, and/or the enacting of an inclusive, bottom-up kind of community life. And “Christianity” can be understood, for example, in the very rationalistic way Tolstoy interprets it, through the Catholic framework Dorothy Day approaches it, or through the various Protestant eyes of people like Jacques Ellul, Vernard Eller, Dave Andrews or Michael Elliott. There can therefore be a lot of ways “Christianity” is interpreted, and equally there are many facets to this “anarchism”. But one way or the other, Christian anarchism holds the view that, properly understood, what Jesus calls us to in the political sphere is some form of anarchism.

How did you become interested in Christian Anarchism, and what led you to write your PhD dissertation/book about it?

Initially, I wanted to study the relationship between religious and political structures (Were Catholic countries more likely to be centralised? Were Daoists more likely to be anarchists? And so on). After I presented my sketchy ideas, I was made to realise this was probably not the appropriate topic for my PhD. The next morning I went to a seminar titled: “Was Jesus a political theorist?” The seminar leader plastered verses from the gospels on the board and invited us to reflect on the question. I thought: “this is clearly political, but if so, it’s also very anarchical.” So I followed that line of inquiry to Tolstoy, since he was described by textbooks as the most famous (sometimes as “the only”) Christian anarchist. Since I could find no book-length study of Tolstoy’s Christian anarchism, I decided my thesis would provide just that. But Tolstoy left several questions unanswered for me (render unto Caesar, Romans 13, the nature of the divine, etc), and I found his take on Christianity to be too easy a criticism to level against him by those who wanted to run away from the piercing critique he was nevertheless still making. I then discovered Ellul, Eller, and Yoder, and kept broadening my reading to include the likes of Andrews, Elliott, the Catholic Workers and many more. So I settled on my final PhD topic: the weaving together of all those apparently loose threads of Christian anarchist thought into as comprehensive as possible a

theory of Christian anarchism. (As to Tolstoy's Christian anarchism, that's now my next research project.)

Christian Anarchists claim that being an anarchist is a natural part of being a Christian. In other words, they feel that all Christians should be anarchists if they are properly following Christ's teachings. Do you feel this argument has merit, and if so, why are so few Christians also anarchists?

From what I've said so far, you'll have guessed I think this argument does have a lot of merit. When it comes to politics, it does seem to me that an anarchist stance is what Christ's teaching and example demands from its followers. Why, then, so few? There are many elements to this answer. For one, what Jesus asks of us is seen by many as simply too demanding, too ambitious, too utopian. Several layers of official theology have also claimed that Jesus didn't really mean this for us here and now, but only for the hereafter (as if there would be any point voicing such demands if that was the case, to voice but one response to this copout). Indeed, it's difficult not to agree with Christian anarchists that Jesus' radical political demands were betrayed by almost all official churches and their theologians as they became more established and institutionalised. What Jesus calls us to is scary in that it is unknown. It seems easier to "stay with the devil we know." To follow Jesus requires faith in love, faith in the power of love to transform human relationships. In short: it seems near impossible, and the official churches have worked hard to convince us that Jesus didn't really call us to such a radical political path anyway.

What are some of the scriptures from the New Testament which provide the foundation for Christian Anarchism?

There really are many, and I can only mention the main ones here (I've tried to cover all those commented on by Christian anarchists in my book). Certainly all those passages that touch on politics point to facets of anarchism. The most famous must be the Sermon on the Mount, but much of its content is repeated in the many passages in which Jesus, James, Peter or Paul talk of forgiveness, of being servants or of not judging one another – the state does not do that (or rather we don't do that through it), and if we did it then the state would anyway become redundant. There is also the third temptation in the desert, a pretty clear condemnation of state idolatry. Or the Temple Cleansing, where Jesus' direct action clearly implies a denunciation of the concentration and abuses of religious, political and economic power (and most Christian anarchists insist the action was nonviolent, by the way). Then there are all the bitter criticisms of the Pharisees as hypocrites in their application of divine law, criticisms that don't seem that inapplicable to some church authorities today. Jesus' arrest and trial also exemplify his attitude with respect to political authorities, and his crucifixion embodies both his condemnation of state violence and his forgiving alternative to overcome it. Then there is the Book of Acts, the many Epistles, and of course the Apocalypse – all of which one can find convincing Christian anarchist exegeses on. In other words, there are many scriptures, and here I can only hint at their Christian anarchist interpretation.

What are some New Testament scriptures which seem to contradict anarchist principles? How are these explained by Christian anarchists?

The two passages that are most frequently brought up as "clear evidence" against Christian anarchist interpretations are Romans 13 and "render unto Caesar." Neither can be discussed in enough depth here. But to hint at the explanation of these offered by Christian anarchists, regarding the former, Paul is really just offering his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, of Jesus' call to forgive and love even the worst of enemies – just as he did by submitting to the

Cross. Romans 13 does not legitimise authorities but calls to submit to them as a way of turning the other cheek, to overcome their evil not through violent resistance but with an exemplary attitude that seeks to patiently understand and forgive. As to “render unto Caesar”, the coins are Caesar’s to claim back, but beyond that, little else “belongs to Caesar.” What is not Caesar’s but God’s, however, includes life and indeed pretty much anything but coins and public monuments. Hence Jesus here calls us to clearly distinguish what really matters a lot from the fickle things that are technically Caesar’s. Again, this is just a far too brief summary of what can be said about these passages, but I’m just giving you the pointers to the Christian anarchist interpretation. I might add that among the other passages raised against Christian anarchists are those where Jesus is said by some to have been violent or to condone violence. A careful (Christian anarchist) reading, however, suggests that these allegations don’t really stand – or certainly don’t hold the monopoly over the truth about these passages.

If anarchist/socialist principles are present in the Bible, why are so many secular anarchists/socialists often so hostile to religious people and belief in God generally?

First, as some Christian anarchists point out, perhaps Christians are to blame for not showing the anarchist way as they were called to. The failure of most self-proclaimed Christians to take up their cross and follow Christ might indeed be partly to blame for the turn, by many of those concerned with social, economic and political injustice, to non-religious (and sometimes strongly anti-religious) doctrines of change. And second, many anarchist/socialist theories are indeed based on non-religious, if not sometimes vehemently atheistic foundations, so their advocates are understandably anticlerical if not altogether anti-religious. It is not surprising if they are therefore hostile to – or at least suspicious of – religious people and belief in God. Many, it should however be noted, are very tolerant of comrades working for similar anarchist/socialist aims even if based on different philosophical or religious foundations.

Many people wonder how a society could exist in which there are no courts, police, or other coercive authority (in other words, who would stop the rapists from rampaging about?). As a result, do you feel that Christian Anarchism could be practiced on a large scale? Or can Christian Anarchism only be practiced on an individual basis? For example, by people like Ammon Hennacy who try to be a “One-Man (or Woman) Revolution.”

This is obviously a difficult question. It should be noted, however, that much would already be different in a Christian (anarchist) society in the first place. People would love one another, care for one another, and so those who turn to criminality today may well not do so in a more loving context. Adin Ballou has a wonderful quote that implicitly makes that point. A systematically loving comportment would presumably reduce the chances of being confronted with hatred and evil in the first place. But there is no guarantee: one may well be confronted with unspeakable evil. The loving – Christian – attitude, though, is precisely to be accepting of this, to try to forgive another human being’s desperate turn to evil. That said, such an attitude cannot be demanded of others. Jesus calls us (or rather: calls me) to it, and we cannot force others to be loving. We cannot force others to expose themselves to evil. It’s a personal choice which requires a lot of courage and determination. So maybe it’ll never work on a large scale, maybe Christian anarchism can only ever be practiced at the margins. We’re still called by Jesus to exemplify and embody love as much as we can. Some effort is better than none, and it reminds humanity of its loving potential. It might be that with enough inspiring examples, society can gradually move to the (Christian anarchist) kingdom of God on earth. But equally, it might be something we’ll never reach. Jesus still calls

us to follow him, even if we end up crucified. And even in a Christian anarchist society, there will presumably still be people bent on doing things that cause real suffering. The understandable reaction will be to be angry, to seek revenge or redress, to try to coerce others in order to prevent this (as if that was working today...). The courageous reaction, however, will be to try to see the evil-doer as a human being (lost, angry, unjust, you name it, but a human being nonetheless) and to patiently try to understand, to love, perhaps even to forgive. One reaction dehumanises and perpetrates the society that already produces such evil in the first place, the other opens up the possibility for transformed, loving human relations.

If yes, what would the pre-requisites for the establishment of such a society be?

I'm not sure we can speak of "pre-requisites." For the likes of Tolstoy or Hennacy, we will get there gradually, as more people are moved to an attitude that is more loving, more understanding, more forgiving. That can sound very broad and vague, but a loving attitude will mean different things in different situations. It can mean trying to understand why this human being made me suffer. It can mean shifting our huge "defence" spending to food, medicine and care for all (across the globe). It can mean seeking ways of redressing evil that don't dehumanise, criminalise and foster resentment. It can mean soup kitchens, hospitality to the homeless, or generosity with all beggars – whatever they use that generosity for. It can mean exposing the inhumanity of a political economy through which we coerce others into slavery. It can mean opening our borders and being neighbours to all. In other words, it means revising all our assumptions about this civilisation we were bred to feel so proud of, asking ourselves what a more loving attitude would mean, and seeking ways to embody that love in the institutions that define our interaction with one another. All these things are not just palliatives for a sick (and sickening) system, but a truly revolutionary way of trying to overcome it. And even if we ever do reach a better society, any achievements must never be taken for granted. New situations will pose new challenges and make room for new, creative ways of expressing love and justice.

Is there a Christian Anarchist who you most admire?

I find them all admirable and courageous in some way. Tolstoy was a great writer and a stubborn advocate of Jesus' teaching. Ellul strove to cover biblical passages more exhaustively. Both spoke out in their context despite their perspective being quite isolated. Eller didn't shy away from facing controversy with his exegesis of Romans 13. The Catholic Workers (Dorothy Day, Peter Maurin, Ammon Hennacy, but so many others in the past and, crucially, today) are particularly admirable for sacrificing so much and striving so hard to live out the Christian anarchist principles they have faith in. Dave Andrews and the communities he speaks of embody a similar commitment that is no less inspiring. There are many others in the past, today and no doubt in the future, who make such huge sacrifices to speak out and live out the radical alternative Jesus calls us to. And for that matter, my admiration for inspiring radicals extends well beyond Christian anarchists – humanity has produced countless examples of people who suffered and made sacrifices, who refused to use force against others in their nonetheless determined attempt to reduce suffering and promote justice for all.

What are some of the main similarities and differences between Christian Anarchism and Liberation Theology? Which do you feel is better supported by scriptures in the New Testament?

The main difference is in the means of change. Liberation theology won't shy away from employing the state apparatus to improve things. Christian anarchism warns against that. In that sense, this difference between Liberation theology and Christian anarchism mirrors that between

Marxism and (secular) anarchism. You won't be surprised if I tell you that I feel Christian anarchism is the better supported perspective by New Testament scriptures. That said, the common ground (as with the secular variants) is considerable, and over-emphasising the differences encourages a sectarianism that may do more harm than good. Liberation theology has also produced many (more?) inspiring examples too, for that matter. But Christian anarchism's denunciation of the state is too scathing to allow a compromise with it. To rephrase the sentence Dorothy Day borrowed from the Wobblies, the new society must be created within the shell of the old, not with it. That is, the new society must supplant the state and what we do to ourselves through it, something which can't be done by finding yet new reasons to perpetuate it. Otherwise, to borrow this time from Yoder, we're just changing the palace guards.

Some secular anarchists (and even some Christian anarchists) claim that a true anarchist could never remain part of an institutionalized Church (whether Catholic, Protestant, Mormon, whatever). Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why?

Yes and no. As churches (perhaps all human institutions?) become institutionalised, they tend to rigidify, to compromise, to lose sight of the impulse which led to their creation. This unfortunately applies to most Christian churches, small or (especially) big. Any radical community must guard against such dangers of institutionalisation if it is to remain dynamic, inspired and moved by what was its original impulse. But most churches also have many sub-communities, many of which remain (or become) inspiring in their ongoing interaction with the world. So in the sense meant by most, a true anarchist could probably not remain part of an institutionalised church, yes, since they are corrupted, rigid, reactionary – but in the sense of church as a gathering of people who here would be striving to follow Jesus' anarchism, there's no automatic reason why they could not, no.

Many people claim that “not resisting evil” and being a pacifist is immoral, because it allows innocents to be killed. Do you think this is correct? Why or why not?

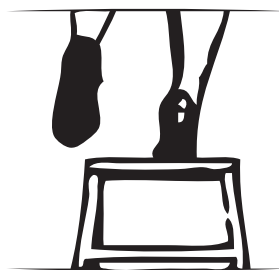
It's the use of violence that is immoral and that kills, not the seeking to avoid it. It's of course very audacious to ask people not to protect their loved ones when attacked, and after all, this can only be a decision willingly taken by those concerned. But it's also important to realise that aggressors are human beings that can be loved too. It's arguably precisely a lack of love and respect, with the dehumanisation that this promotes, which often lies at the root of violence. And using violence to prevent violence only shifts the violence and suffering onto others. So the problem is complex, but it does not help to accuse of the worst cowardice or immorality those who try their utmost to avoid violence, and who often do so with huge courage and moral fortitude: they're putting their very lives on the line (without a weapon to defend it in their hand) while trying to adhere to a demanding moral code which treats all human being with equal love and respect. To me that is not immoral, but a call to a different morality.

Some people feel that pacifism is an ideology that is embraced by white, privileged liberals, because it allows them to feel good about themselves (Look at what a great person I am for going to the candle-light peace vigil against the war), while not requiring them to make any real sacrifices (like the Vietnamese people who are left with the job of fighting and dying to stop US imperialism). Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not?

Again, this is complicated. Yes, it's an unacceptable copout to promote a peace when that peace is fundamentally unfair on others. And yes, arrogance and pride are always a temptation, a risk. But committed pacifists won't rest unless peace and justice can be enjoyed by all. Pacifism

can also require huge sacrifices – conscientious objectors, Gandhian salt marchers, or stop the war activists have been sent to prison, beaten, sometimes even killed. But one must of course always keep a critical eye and guard against the risk of settling into a comfortable life the very comforts of which depend on injustices suffered by others. Peace and justice will only be achieved when enjoyed by all. But that includes those human beings who are led to commit violence against us. Pacifist, loving means offer the hope of peace and love to all. That can't be said of many other ideologies.

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