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Anti-Fascism Theologically Understood
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agrees with them and shares their values, and the creation and maintenance of such worlds is itself bound up with profound processes of violence which, again, make genuine free speech impossible. This approach is, moreover, politically ineffective, as was made clear by the election of Trump itself, which happened, in large part, because the left has, for decades now, seen itself as too good to organize in rural or other normatively (though not necessarily) "conservative" spaces, and have therefore given the far right a monopoly on recruiting there. We cannot act as though everyone who disagrees with us is a nazi—not least of all because there are, now as much as at any time in recent history—real nazis organizing to desecrate our cemeteries, dox our comrades, and burn crosses in our towns.

Because antifascim is a practice of maintaining this distinction, by researching fascist individuals and organizations and then mobilizing, through a variety of strategies and tactics, to keep them out of our communities, it is not just a crucial aspect of community self-defense, but a key site for making left-wing politics, in general, more democratic, in ways that are crucially important for leftist organizing, theologically understood. It is a practice of making a particular sort of good judgements, and exercising a particular sort of prudence, which is necessary for revolutionary movements as a whole. This is why it is a key practice for those who do politics at the intersection of Christianity and Anarchism.

own. The aim of these categories is to differentiate people with whom we disagree and people who threaten spaces in which disagreements are even possible.

Of course, making this distinction in practice can be difficult. This is why antifascists spend so much time studying the far right and why antifascist actions are often accompanied by media releases describing exactly who the fascists are, what groups they are linked to, what symbols they are using and what those mean, etc. The practice of research, integral to antifascist organizing work (though not often associated with it in the minds of those not familiar with the work), attests the necessity of careful judgement and moral reasoning—what some Christian traditions call the virtue of prudence—to antifascist politics.

Nevertheless, this distinction is as essential as it is difficult to make. When the Left (and/or the church) fails to make it, one of two absolutely disastrous things happens. On the one hand, we can start thinking of all of our enemies as "enemies we can talk to" and we become liberals. We ignore the massive issues of power that are at play in our attempts to seize and defend spaces for free speech, and, as a result, end up excluding or at least making life very difficult for those who are not straight, not white, not cis, not male, not protestant, not normatively able bodied. The classic case of this is the liberal attitude towards the contemporary university, which asks faculty and students of color to endure blatant racism on a daily basis and still act "collegially" with those who perpetrate it. Such spaces, in truth, have made "collegiality" impossible through an utterly imbalanced relation of power.

On the other hand, we can start thinking of all of our enemies as "enemies we can't talk to," and we isolate ourselves into a liberal-progressive gated community which, again, paradoxically, is primarily available to those of a certain race, income, and social background. Only bourgeois white men can, in reality, afford to live in a world where everyone

I offer this reflection a bit sheepishly, and with a great many apologies, since it is just over three months late. In December, I agreed to write something on antifascist organizing and direct action in the wake of the election of Donald Trump, and told Brett that I would get him the text in January. At the time, it seemed like a logical thing to do. I had just helped organize two relatively successful mass direct actions against white supremacist groups in central North Carolina, where I live—the first against Alamance County Taking Back Alamance County on Saturday, November 26, 2016 in Burlington, and the second against the Loyal White Knights of the KKK a week later, on Saturday, December 3, 2016 in Pelham, NC and Danville, VA. In both cases I had served as an "above ground" organizer—someone who was unmasked and available to talk to the press and interested members of the public—on behalf of the local branch of my labor union, the Industrial Workers of the World. As such, reflecting on antifascism theologically in a public forum like Jesus Radicals made sense for me, as I was already publicly connected with two actions that could serve as decent case studies. The topic was, of course, urgent—and remains so—for obvious reasons.

There are a number of reasons that I didn't make that deadline — not the least of which were health issues combined with the enormous strain that the #DisruptJ20 actions in DC took on me, personally, and, more importantly, the organizing communities of which I am a part. But I also found that crafting a theological approach to discussing antifascism was harder than I thought. I knew, from the outset, that framing the issue in terms of "violence" and "nonviolence" as methods of political action would immediately trigger a predictable and useless reprise of the hopelessly stale debates that these terms have evoked and continue to evoke in radical Christian communities. Is lighting a trash can on fire violent? Is it acceptable if it gets a bonna fide neonazi's speaking engagement at a university student center shut down? These are important

questions, but they deserve to be discussed on their own terms. At first, I thought to approach the issue in terms of the distinction between "mass antifascism" or "community self-defense," on the one hand, and "antifa" tactics, on the other. This discussion, however, while it is extremely important, is not a very accessible way of approaching antifascism for those who have never encountered it. More importantly, perhaps, this distinction masks a prior commitment which is its condition and possibility—the commitment to deny avowed fascists and other explicitly white supremacist individuals and groups a platform to speak and organize.

Fundamentally, antifascists are committed to keeping the racist, misogynist, homophobic far right off of our streets and out of our universities and other public forums. Before any conversation about the strategies and tactics for achieving this goal can occur, the goal itself must be theologically narrated. I have come to believe that the correct way to meet this need is to speak in terms of a topic that we are more accustomed to hearing about from secular liberals than from Christian Anarchists, i.e. free speech. It is my goal in this essay to briefly sketch a theological groundwork for free speech, understood in a non-state-centric way (i.e., as more than simply a concession made by states to limit their powers to censor dissent), and then to position antifascist organizing and action as a way of defending free speech spaces as spaces in which love of neighbor and reconciliation of enemies can occur, against individuals and groups that threaten their conditions of possibility.

FREE SPEECH AS A FORM OF ENEMY-LOVE

It is common, of course, to hear antifascists accused of undermining free speech, and therefore broader democratic values in American culture. This is the sort of argument people

tiate with elected officials (including quite conservative elected officials) but will never, ever negotiate with cops. You can't negotiate with the cops. Not while they have guns and the permission and command to use them that comes with their badges. Moreover, if someone is trying to kill you, not only does that mean that you can't have free speech with them, but it also means that there can't be free speech in any space that you share with them. That's why cops aren't allowed to attend abolitionist meetings, much less speak at them.

The same goes for fascists. You cannot have free speech with the Klan or the Traditionalist Workers Party or any other group that organizes on Stormfront. Moreover, when they enter a space, it means that the people in that space can no longer have free speech with one another. This means that, so long as someone is an active fascist or white supremacist, they must be prevented from entering the spaces that we are trying to create where we seek to share free speech with our neighbors in obedience to the command to love our enemies. This is why, whether the strategy is mass action or antifa, and whether the tactics are violent or nonviolent, it is necessary to deny avowed fascists and other explicitly white supremacist individuals and groups a platform to speak and organize in our communities. They must be barred from our churches (and presumably excommunicated), shut down on our campuses, driven from our streets.

There is a key distinction operating in this analysis which is not often made by Christians or Leftists, and to our peril. This is the distinction between enemies whom we can talk to (like elected officials) and enemies we can't talk to (like cops and fascists). These are not, of course, categories for dividing up people—a cop can (and should) cease to be a cop; a fascist can (and should) cease to be a fascist. Rather, they are categories of "enemy positions," divisions between projects opposed to our own and projects that threaten to undermine the space in which we can meaningfully encounter projects opposed to our

the normal state of affairs is for people to meet one another as enemies—a world always already marked by myriad forms of social conflict. We stand as members of communities engaged in rival social and political projects, projects that are, in many cases, in tension or outright contradiction with one another. We disagree on how to run our schools, how to protect the environment, how much to pay in taxes. The people engaged in projects antithetical to our own are meaningfully called our enemies. And we are commanded to love them.

This means that we must create spaces in which we can hear our enemies speak and in which they can hear us speak. This is harder than it might initially sound. Free speech of this sort is constantly under attack from a neoliberal capitalist order committed to a program of enclosure and endless war. Free speech breaks down both when space to talk is monopolized—as when two parties monopolize (or duopolize) debate stages and corporate owned media—or when it is flattened—as when Twitter reduces all acceptable "speech" to 140 characters and ensure that no one could ever hope to meaningfully listen to everyone else. Anyone who has facilitated a political meeting with more than ten people (especially by formal consensus) knows how difficult it is to get people to truly listen to one another. The spaces in which we can meet one another as neighbors, therefore—common spaces is probably a better designation than public spaces—are necessarily spaces wrested from the threat of enclosure, spaces that must be seized and defended politically. This is what the original free speech movement at Berkeley was all about.

This is where antifascism comes in. Just as you can't know someone who cannot speak freely, you can't speak freely with someone who is actively engaged in an organized attempt to kill you. There is a difference between someone who disagrees with you about a life-and-death matter and someone who is trying to kill you. This is why many police and prison abolitionist groups, like the ones that I organize with, will sometimes nego-

make when they say "don't sink to their level" or "you're engaging in censorship" or warn that, if you repress one group of people whom you disagree with, you will soon find yourself suffering the same repression. Antifascists, on this account, are just another species of liberal "snowflakes," who cannot stand (so go the stereotyped accounts) to be "triggered" by the sound of an opinion that they disagree with. Such a position is said to be immature at best, anti-intellectual and anti-democratic at worst. These are arguments that seen a particularly strong resurgence since clashes between fascists and antifascists took place twice in the last three months on the campus of UC Berkeley, the home of the free speech movement of the 1960s.

There are at least two problems with the account of free speech implicit in these sorts of arguments: first that it is state-centric and second that it draws on a properterian view of rights. The accusation that antifascists are engaged in censorship gives no heed to the fact that they are not agents of the state. There is a huge difference between a massive bureaucracy, employed by a totalitarian government, to seek out and repress dissident and nonconforming opinions, on the one hand, and the refusal to allow Milo Yiannopoulos to speak on a local university campus, on the other. The antifascists at Berkeley in February and April did not seek out the bigoted reactionaries whom they were protesting — the reactionaries came to their community and they refused to let them organize there.

That anti-antifascists typically ignore this crucial distinction between the "top down" character of censorship and the "bottom up" dynamics of the actions they are criticizing betrays a far more expansive notion of free speech than simply as a restriction on what state structures can do—a feature of checks and balances democracy. Rather, they understand free speech in terms of what the Declaration of Independence called "inalienable rights" and what the democratic movements of continental Europe, starting with the French Revolution, called "the

Rights of Man." This is not, of course, the only way of thinking about rights—the catholic tradition, for example, has a long tradition of talk about "natural rights" based in prior obligations of care towards God and neighbor (the paradigmatic example being the argument for a living wage put forward in Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum)—and I do not wish to be read as opposing rights language altogether. However, the sort of rights language named by "inalienable rights" or the "rights of Man" is by far the most prevalent in American politics, and is the sort implicit in liberal free speech arguments against antifascism—this is an understanding of rights rooted in private property.

The argument of Locke and his successors (including Thomas Jefferson and the other "founding fathers" of the American republic) was that free, white men have certain rights in virtue of owning property—including, crucially, their own bodies. "Rights," in the language used by the Declaration of Independence and other liberal-enlightenment documents, denotes effective control over a particular area of space, space that one can dispose of as they will in virtue of owning it. Just as a landowner can build whatever they want on a piece of real estate, a free man can do whatever he wants with his mouth for the same reason—because he owns them both. It should (but cannot) go without saying that this understanding of rights can only be predicated of free men, who own their bodies, in contrast to women and slaves, whose bodies are owned by others. The idea of preventing a nazi from spouting their propaganda is offensive to liberals in the same way, and for the same reason, as it is equally offensive to them to prevent a corporation from strip mining a mountain by sabotaging their equipment, or to smash the windows of a local starbucks.

This begs the question—should we reject free speech entirely? There are certainly leftists who think that we should, or that free speech ought, at least, to be deprioritized. More often than not, however, antifascists are usually content to point out that they are not in favor of censorship because they are not state actors. The effect of this is to endorse a purely negative understanding of free speech—a set of limits on what the state can do—without offering any positive account of the public sphere as a space where strangers and enemies can talk to one another. This is, in my view, a mistake. But if we are not to endorse some version of the property-rights approach or the "checks and balances" approach to free speech, how should we think about it, as Christians and as Anarchists?

I would like to suggest that, understood theologically, free speech is proper to the command that Christians love their enemies. This may seem strange, even as a theological way of approaching free speech. More often, theologians, going back to Calvin and the English Puritans, argue that free speech is necessary so that prophecy and the proclamation of the gospel can be heard. This certainly isn't wrong, but more needs to be said. Specifically, what kind of space is necessary for Christians to meet strangers and enemies as neighbor to be loved? You cannot love someone you do not know, and you cannot know someone you haven't heard, and you can't hear someone who isn't allowed to speak. Free speech is a means of charity, a norm that befits communities of people who meet one another as neighbors.

"ENEMIES WE CAN('T) TALK TO" — ANTIFASCISM AS THE DEFENSE OF FREE SPEECH

This is a necessarily conflictual relation. It must be stressed, again and again, that the people that Christ calls us to love are our enemies—and they are usually our enemies for very good reasons. That we are commanded to love our enemies tells the truth about the world in which we live, a world in which