

In Defense of Multiple Belonging, or “On Christianity And”

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Arising, as it does, out of a turn towards anabaptist theology by white American evangelicals, Christian Anarchism has often displayed hostility towards multiple belonging. This can be seen in the precise relationship that many of those engaged in it imagine between radical Christianity and the Anarchist traditions on which it draws. For example, in a series of posts based on the Primer on Christian Anarchism that was, at one point, given annually at the Jesus Radicals conference, Mark van Steenwyk writes:

From my perspective, it is better to embrace a Christianity that affirms the anarchic trajectory of the Way of Jesus on its own terms than simply to smash together Christianity and Anarchism into some sort of strained mashup. Often, I meet self-described Christian anarchists who have no real way of putting these two things together in any way that makes sense to them. They simply hold one tradition in each hand, ignoring the conflict they feel until, eventually, they let go of one of them.¹

My point here is not to attack Mark or hold him to account for something that he wrote almost half a decade ago. God knows that I have changed a lot since 2011, and I’m sure that he has, too. I’m not trying to do intellectual history here as much as genealogy—a symptomology rather than a diagnosis, that seeks to draw out some of the surface level features of a shared condition without essentializing it, in order to render that condition articulable. This quote, whatever its relationship to any particular thinker or to the evolution of Jesus Radicals as an institutional structure, has the virtue of documenting (literally rendering as text) an idea that has been spoken and unspokenly assumed in this space over the course of many years. This assumption is that multiple belonging, “holding one tradition in each hand,” is untenable and ill-advised.

It is important to account for the ancestry of this assumption. It does not come from the Anarchist side of the Christian Anarchist equation, even if it finds occasional resonances there. Anarchists tend, at least, to recognize that what David Graeber calls “counter-power” exists quite

¹ Mark van Steenwyk, “A Divine Impossibility: A Primer on Christian Anarchism, Part 1” in Jesus Radicals, 8 September, 2011

apart from their particular tradition, in many different cultural and historical contexts, regardless, even of the concrete existence of dominatory institutions like markets and states.² Most Anarchist groups tend to organize themselves on the assumption that this is true. A classical example is to be found in how my union, the Industrial Workers of the World, has historically insisted on allowing its members to be “dual card holders,” belonging to the IWW and to other groups. As wobbler historian Steve Ongerth points out, this was the issue over which we refused to join the Third International affiliated Red Trade Union International, which demanded a “with us or against us” split between communists and noncommunists that marginalized Anarchists and other anti-authoritarians and devastated the American Left for decades thereafter.³

On the Christian side of the equation, it is important to recognize that hostility to multiple belonging is far from universal. Rather, it comes, I would argue, from a specifically evangelical protestant way of conceiving the duality of the church and the world. A paradigm-setting statement of this position comes from evangelical icon CS Lewis’ text, *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis places the following words in the mouth of his daemon, which more or less perfectly express the evangelical position on church and world:

What we want, if men [sic] become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call “Christianity And.” You know – Christianity and the Crisis, Christianity and the New Psychology, Christianity and the New Order, Christianity and Faith Healing, Christianity and Psychical Research, Christianity and Vegetarianism, Christianity and Spelling Reform. If they must be Christians let them at least be Christians with a difference. Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian coloring.⁴

I think that it would be fair to say that most evangelicals, including those who have appropriated anabaptist theology and labeled it Christian Anarchism, are worried that these words express the Devil’s hopes and ambitions all too well. The text of the Primer quoted above is an extension of this anxiety, worrying that Christian Anarchism will simply devolve into “Christianity and Anarchism,” to *Screwtape’s* delight.

This position should not be simply dismissed. There is profound wisdom in the caution not to reduce Christianity to one item in a set, whether that set is “religions,” “philosophies,” “artistic traditions,” or “varieties of radical politics.” The Gospel of Jesus Christ speaks to each of these sets, but not as a member of any of them. It is, rather, in the formulation of Karl Barth, the Word of God that throws all human words into profound crisis.

Yet this is only one side of a dialectic. The other side is that, even as the gospel throws human religion, human philosophy, human art, and human politics into crisis, these are precisely the terms in which human beings will respond to God, if they are to respond at all. The profound danger in an absolute church-world dualism is that it can cause one to forget that, in the dialectic between all human words and the wholly-other-yet-incarnate Word of God, the church is located squarely on the human side. Christianity is the religion among religions that seeks to respond to the gospel, which is alien to all religion. The Church is a political society among political societies

² David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, (Chicago, IL, Prickly Paradigm Press, 2004), 24–25

³ Steve Ongerth, *Redwood Uprising: The Story of Judi Bari and Earth First! – IWW Local #1*, text available online at <http://www.judibari.info/book/2>

⁴ CS Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters with Screwtape Proposes a Toast* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1996), 135

that seeks to respond to the Kingdom that is the revolutionary abolition of all politics. If Christ-followers forget this, we risk abandoning that most basic feature of the Way that Jesus taught us: solidarity with our neighbors, and, ipso facto, with the world, for whom and for which, after all, our Lord Jesus Christ was content to die.

Hostility to multiple belonging must be named as an oppressive dynamic, and, indeed, this is precisely how it plays out in radical Christian spaces, including Christian Anarchism. When Christian Anarchists say only that the gospel is alien to all human religions, but forget that Christianity remains a human religion among human religions, they can neglect or even repudiate solidarity with other religious traditions, such as Judaism and Islam. As someone who identifies as both a Jew and a Christian (and whose Anarchism, truth be told, is more Jewish than Christian, more Emma Goldman than Leo Tolstoy, more Abbie Hoffman than Gregory Boyd), I have experienced this dynamic firsthand. Similarly, when Christian Anarchists say only that the Kingdom is alien to all politics, but forget that the Church remains a political society among political societies, they can become hostile to those who find their home both in Church and in other radical political spaces, whether queer spaces, #BlackLivesMatter or migrant justice and prison abolition, even other Anarchist spaces. They can, in short, ignore the Christian tradition's identification, in this country, with straightness, with whiteness, with maleness, not to mention with its own religious hegemony. It becomes okay to be Christian and straight, Christian and white, Christian and male, Christian and protestant, but not to be Christian and queer, Christian and committed to the black freedom struggle, Christian and a feminist or a womanist, Christian and Jewish or Muslim, because the straightness, whiteness, maleness, and protestantness of American Christianity is subsumed within the wholly otherness of the Word of God.

To name this hostility to multiple belonging as a feature of specifically white evangelical protestant theology is to be open to alternative ways of thinking about church and world within the Christian tradition. Even within the anabaptist theology that so many evangelicals who become Christian Anarchists draw on, such alternatives exist. John Howard Yoder, for example, argues in *Christian Witness to the State* that, out of a conviction that in the resurrection order the universe already belongs to Jesus, Christ-followers should engage not only in “conscientious objection” to war, capital punishment, and other ways in which the world stands in rebellion against God, but also in “conscientious participation” in movements, institutions, and communities of affinity by which the world stands in obedience to God.⁵ Conscientious participation is a largely untapped theological resource in Christian Anarchism. It is worth thinking through what it would look like if, instead of expressing concern about “Christianity And” or “holding one tradition in each hand,” our dominant theological narrative actively encouraged participation in “secular” spaces like Black and Pink or #BlackLivesMatter or No One Is Illegal or the IWW or #IdleNoMore or the National Day Laborer Organizing Network or Undocuqueer as a dimension of our membership in a church that is not just one and holy but also catholic (universal) and apostolic (sent out).

One need not be reduced, as the text of the Primer is, to insisting that, if a Christian's identity as a baptized person is not their only identity, and the church their only community of belonging, that they will compromise their integrity as a disciple of Jesus. Alternatively, baptism can be the crucible within which all of our identities are measured and transformed. On this reading, to say that, in Christ, we are baptized “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (Matthew 3:11, cf Luke

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2002), 157

3:16) is to point to the fire that burns away chaff from wheat and dross from the gold. Drawing explicitly on Barth, this is the position that James Cone takes in *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *Black Theology of Liberation* (1970). Because Jesus Christ is the Oppressed One, to be Christian and white is untenable, but to be Christian and black is necessary, because, in Christ, while God has said No to whiteness, God has also said Yes to blackness. To worry (as many of Cone's critics, in fact, did) that this meant "holding one tradition in each hand" is to forget that God's Yes is just as transformative as God's No. Really, blackness is only secondarily an "and;" it is a lowercase-a "and," because, even outside the Christian church, it is first and foremost a Yes to the God who, in Christ says Yes to life. Whiteness, on the other hand, is an absolute "and," a capital-A And, because, even (especially?) when it is churchly, it is a No to the God who, in Christ, says No to death.

The same can be said for other forms of multiple belonging. One can be a Christian and an Anarchist but not a Christian And an authoritarian because God says Yes to counter-power and No to domination. As a Jew, I can be a Christian and an Anti-Zionist but not a Christian And a Zionist because God says Yes to liberation and No to apartheid. As queer, one can be a Christian and a Black and Pink member but not a Christian And an HRC member because God says Yes to the all of us or none of us politics of intersectionality and queer abolitionism and No to assimilationism, transphobia, and racism, even in the name of penultimate goods like same-sex marriage. In direct reversal of what the first (and many of the most recent) Christian missionaries on these territories said, one can be a Christian and a member of an indigenous nation but not a Christian And an American or a Canadian, because God says Yes to land, freedom, and self-determination for native peoples and No to genocide and settler colonialism. For those of us who are baptized in the name of the triune Lord, it is possible to say all of this with confidence because we have received the revelation of God's Yes and God's No as a single Word: Jesus Christ.

In conclusion, as people who emphasize the strongly anti-domination character of the eschatological Kingdom announced and enacted by God's incarnate Word, it is important for Christian Anarchists to recognize that no one is "merely Christian," not even Jesus Christ. The humanity that, in Him, exists in hypostatic union with His divinity, is historically, culturally, and sociologically located, as all humanity, by definition, is — including the humanity every person baptized into His body. To claim to have repudiated all of our affinities of belonging apart from our affinity with God is to claim more than the Word of God claimed for Himself when He came to claim us as belonging to Him. It is to be expected, therefore, that Christians will participate in other communities of belonging outside the church, including other religious and political communities. Because, however, the incarnation defines what it is to be normatively human — that is, to live out of love for God and therefore for neighbor rather than the selfish loves⁶ that make domination the ruling principle of the present age — the conscientious participation of Christians in these non-Christian spaces does not detract from, but can, rather, be a profound expression of, the practice of discipleship. All of this is to say: Jesus Christ already reigns, and Screwtape and his comrades, quite literally, haven't got a chance in hell.

⁶ I use "selfish loves" rather than "self-love" here quite deliberately. For those who experience the violence and oppression of empire most directly, self-love is one of the most faithful expressions of the love of God that it is possible to imagine.

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