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Anarchism

Hugh Owen Pentecost

July 4, 1889

Good people who hold opinions not commonly understood generally have a bad name. The world is ready to believe almost anything of a man except that he is a genuinely good man. If his life is stainless but unconventional, the world suspects some hidden shame or base motive. So far are most people from understanding or desiring what is true and right that the highest truth is often believed to be the lowest lie, and the purest right is looked upon as the blackest wrong.

Thus Jesus, who was the incarnation of earnest goodness, was said by the Pharisees to be possessed of a devil. That was because their own souls were so false that their moral vision was distorted. They looked upon goodness and thought it was badness. Thus also the early Christians were accused of indulging in lecherous orgies, when in reality they were living lives of great purity. It was only that they held unpopular doctrines: doctrines which most people did not, perhaps could not, understand. Many people know their own selfishness, deceitfulness, and greediness and they cannot understand that there may be others who are unselfish, frank and generous.

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Now, all this applies to the people in our midst who are commonly called anarchists. They are looked upon as a bloodthirsty set of murderers who desire to destroy society in order to reap a little gain from pillage among the ruins. To call a man an anarchist to today is to heap as much disgrace upon him as it was to call a man a Christian in the first century or an abolitionist before the war.

Few of us realize that Jesus was arrested, flung into jail and hanged with the odium of the community, attached to him just as it attached to the men who were recently hanged in Chicago. But such was the case. Art and religion have made the hanging of Jesus a very splendid affair. But in reality it was a much less important matter when it happened than the Chicago hanging. He was probably dragged into what we now call a police court, put through some sort of rough trial, and hanged as a common tramp whom society wished to get rid of, would now be hanged.

There is a man going through the Southern states now, claiming to be Jesus Christ come to earth again. The negroes are following him to some extent. He dispatches of last week say that the police authorities are trying to arrest him. They have evidently offered him money in order to establish the charge of vagrancy against him, because the dispatches say he will not take money publicly. But they say he gets along somehow or other, and "it is feared" – that is the language of the dispatch – that he cannot be arrested as a vagrant.

Now, here is a man doing just what Jesus Christ did. He is poor. He has gathered a few disciples. He is going from place to place preaching. He is not trying to make money. There is nothing against his character. He seems to be a good man. And the police, backed up, of course, by all the respectable people, are trying to find an excuse to arrest the man and throw him into prison. And they will find the excuse yet, no doubt, because society has no use for a poor man that he will not suppress nor sell for money. A millionaire may be an Infidel, a Socialist, an Anarchist, or a Free Lover

and society only smiles and calls him an eccentric. Society rather likes him better for his oddities, but if a poor man thinks out of the orthodox groves and acts a little differently from other people, it will go hard on him, especially if he happens to be a very high-minded, pure and good man.

What I started to say is that Jesus Christ was, in his day, in about the same relation to society that this poor man down south, who thinks he is imitating him, is in. He was in about the same relation to society that an Anarchist is now. That is to say, he thought about the same doctrines that the anarchists do, and was about as badly hated as the anarchists now are.

An anarchist was drawn to serve on a jury the other day in Chicago, and when he was examined as to his fitness to serve, he said he did not believe in punishing people by law. He believed in preventing people from becoming criminals. The judge asked him if he would vote to sentence the prisoner if he were found to be guilty of violating the statute law. The anarchist said that he would not. "Officer, take this man to jail and let him stay there till morning," said the judge. This is how the newspapers reported the occurrence, and it is about what would have happened if Jesus had been before that judge.

Now, it is curious that the Christian world worships Jesus and persecutes the only people who believe in his teachings. And yet it isn't very curious either, because the Christian world does not pretend to believe in what Jesus taught. There is probably not one minister in this city who believes that the Golden Rule will work, or that it is wise to take careful, anxious thought for the morrow, or that the strongest force that can be used is to return good for evil, is to speak the truth and take the consequences, nor resisting when physical force is used.

It costs a good deal to worship Jesus, I admit, but it doesn't cost anything like what it does to follow his teachings. And that is, no doubt, one reason why so many people worship him and at

the same time persecute the few people who teach about what he taught.

It is often said that Jesus was a Socialist. That is true, but he was not a governmental Socialist, or what is commonly called a State Socialist. He was more like what would now be called a Communist--an Anarchist-Communist. I suppose it sounds rather strangely for me to say so, but I think in so far as Jesus had any social views they were very close to those of John Most,¹ except that Herr Most believes in using physical force to bring his ideas into practice and Jesus did not.

Jesus seemed to think that all persons should enjoy their property in common, governed by no law, except that each should do to the others what he would wish them to do to him. I don't think he ever carried the idea out to include a whole city or a whole nation. He seemed to think that groups of people should live in that way, submitting to the laws of the State, just or unjust, quietly and peaceably. But when his idea is carried out, it becomes Communistic-Anarchism; so that the two most hateful words in the English language describe almost exactly the manner in which the nominal founder of the Christian church taught us that we should live in our social relations.

Ah,.. My friends, this is a queer world. We worship men who said and did certain things long, long ago, but we persecute and slay the men who say and do substantially the same things today. It is a queer world, isn't it?

It is very difficult to define anarchism and to tell you just what the anarchists want, but the reason why it is difficult is because Anarchism is such a simple science and the anarchists want just what the laws of the universe would give us if we should obey them in all things. Anarchism is something that you have to understand

¹ The famous orator Johann (sometimes John) Most (1846-1906) was a German anarchist who arrived in the US in 1882. His teachings at the time of this lecture favored assassinations and armed revolution.

do to him, I suppose it would sound very awful, But that is exactly what men do now -they murder people and run the risk of being hanged, but there is also a chance that they will become quite rich and respectable afterward. If a man wanted to hoard his money he would be at liberty to do so, but there would be no State to take care of it for him. He would have to guard it himself.

But why go on? You must think the thing out for yourself. If you are steeped in conservatism and crusted over with conventionality you will not like the doctrine because you cannot understand it. But if your brain is clear, if your mind is pure, if you are selfish with only the highest of selflessness, viz: that which seeks your own good by seeing to it that everyone else has his rights as well as yourself, or, indeed, whether you do or do not; if you understand how much stronger public opinion, or what we call fashion, is than law; if you believe in reason, conscience, love; if you believe that the laws of the universe are wise and beneficent you must see that this doctrine of Justice, Fraternity, and Freedom, that this commonly called Anarchy, is the bedrock of Truth upon the social question. Short of it the logical mind, the just soul, the pure heart cannot stop. Beyond it is impossible to go.

Of course the question at once arises: Will it work? -and how can it work? I do not know how you would answer such questions, but as for me I do not know what to trust better than Truth. If a thing is true, I will trust it. If a thing is true, it will work. If a thing is true, the people will find a way to get there some day.

No, I suppose it will be said that I am an Anarchist. But I distinctly declare that I am not. I am no kind of an "ist." He word Anarchist, like every other party name, means more things than any one man can believe, and it is adopted by some people whose characters and proposed methods no right-minded person can approve. I am not an Anarchist. But I do believe that the social question in all its relations will not be solved until we reach Justice, Fraternity, and Freedom through obedience to natural law or, if you please, God's law, alone.

and morality can be enforced by law. But they can't. Most people think that when you bring an injustice into this world by law, you can prevent it from being followed to its natural consequences by another law. But you can't.

When you allow men to own land that they will not use, thus crowding someone else of who needs it and would use it; when you allow men to say how much or how little money can circulate, thus making the products of labor as cheap or as dear as they please; when you make a law that restrains men from buying what they need where they please, or that restrains them from eating and drinking what and where they please, you rob them and you unjustly oppress them. The natural consequence will be poverty and crime, and all your subsequent law cannot prevent those consequences.

Now, Anarchism says: The road to happiness and goodness is through unmaking all these unjust and oppressive laws and allowing me to live together in perfect freedom to do right, which they do not have. I have already said I cannot explain this to you if you have not the ability to think the thing out yourself, but I can illustrate a little. For example: Anarchism would have no compulsory taxation. All money necessary for society would be voluntarily contributed. A man would own only as much land as he could and actually did occupy. All unoccupied land would be free for use by anyone who wished it. People would trade among themselves in their own way, using any kind of money they pleased. All things that were for the common good would be done in common by as many as choose to cooperate for that purpose.

Everyone would be allowed to do just as he pleased, but he would, of course, have to take the consequences. A man would be allowed to work as little or as much as he liked, or not at all if he wished to run the risk of starving to death. If he chose to become a slave he would be allowed to do so; but, of course, he would go free when he wished to. If I should say that if a man pleased to murder another man and run the risk of what his neighbors would

just as you understand love. It is not a theory; it is not a system. There for it is very difficult to explain. What is love? It is something that I feel, that moves me, that gives me joy, that tends to keep me pure and good. It is something that I experience toward this person and not that. I love my wife not because she is beautiful, or homely or bright or dull or tall or short; I love my friend not because he is this or that or the other. In both cases it is because there is something in my wife and my friend that awakens my love. But I cannot explain my love to you. I can only say: "Were you ever in love? Then you know what love is."

Now Anarchy is something so simple and natural that it cannot be defined. Do you understand what natural law means? Do you know what I mean by the order of the universe? Do you understand what is meant by human nature? Well Anarchism means to live in accordance with the laws of the universe in general and of human nature in particular. But, you see, if you do not know what it means to live in accordance with natural law, you cannot understand what Anarchism is. Just as is you have never been in love you cannot understand what love is by any amount of explaining.

No doubt, many persons will be greatly surprised to hear me say this, because the common idea is that Anarchists wish to destroy society with dynamite. It is perfectly true that there are many Anarchists who believe that a bloody is impending, and that it will be their duty to use that revolution for all it is worth to establish the new and better order. And it is true that some anarchists believe that society can only be redeemed by successive revolutions; much on the principle that was observed at Johnstown when they blew up the mass of debris at the railroad bridge.² Trees, houses, locomotives and other things were jammed in there so tightly that nothing but an explosion could loosen them. And so some anarchists think

² The Johnstown, Pennsylvania flood disaster occurred one month before this lecture was delivered.

that society is so crystallized into wrong forms that nothing but a revolution can bring any change for the better.

But you make a great mistake if you think of these men as cut-throats and assassins. They are just such true patriots as Washington, and Warren³ and Marion⁴ and the rest of our noble “traitors” and “rebels” were a hundred years ago, Washington once put his fingers around his neck, in the dark days of the revolution, and said: “I wonder how it would feel to have a rope around that? We get so dazzled with the glories of our past that all our heroes would have been hanged, just as we hang the Anarchist heroes –if they hadn’t succeeded in their revolution.

But the revolutionary part of the Anarchist scheme is wholly incidental. I don’t believe in that part of it, although I do not know but that good does sometimes result from the use of physical force. But, of course, if a man takes up arms against the Government he knows what he must expect: If he succeeds he will be a crowned hero, if he fails he will be a hanged criminal. He who takes up the sword cannot complain if he perishes by the sword.

Anarchism, however, does not involve forceful revolution, it certainly does not involve that the Anarchists should incite or carry on the revolution. Anarchism means what I have said: living under natural law instead of statute law. When it is said that Anarchists wish to abolish law and government, it is perfectly true in the sense that they wish to establish natural law and human fraternity in place of statute law and the organized injustice that we now call government.

But it may be asked: if Anarchism is so manifestly just, why does not everybody believe in it? Because very few people under-

³ Dr. Joseph Warren (1741–1775), the revolutionary leader of Massachusetts, was distinguished for his insurrectionist writings, his militant public speeches, and his political leadership.

⁴ Francis Marion (1732–1795), nicknamed the “swamp fox,” was an officer in the 2nd South Carolina Regiment during the American Revolution who is now regarded by historians as the father of modern guerrilla warfare.

stand what it means. I have a friend who is an Anarchist, but he will never call himself an Anarchist. He says he prefers to call himself a Christian, because there is less prejudice against the name, and pure Christianity and pure Anarchism are the same thing. Good people are reading this man’s writings from week to week –people who abhor the name of Anarchism –and because he calls what he writes Christianity, they think it very high and pure doctrine, which it is. But if he called it Anarchism, they wouldn’t read a word of it.

As I said a few minutes ago: This is a queer world.

And then, too, few persons are Anarchists because few persons believe that their God knows more than the legislature or the common council. It is just as I told you. Jesus is good enough to worship but he knew nothing about business. At least so the average Christian thinks. And with the average Christian, religion is one thing and business quite another. Most people think that God knows how to run the universe in general, but it takes Tammany Hall⁵ to run the City of New York, and the great and glorious legislature at Trenton to run the State of New Jersey, and the august conclave of piety and worldly wisdom that centers on Washington to run the United States. In other words, most people have no faith at all in natural law, notwithstanding the fact that it is perfectly apparent that no statute that was ever made can be enforced against natural law.

Most people think they can rob one another by law, by methods that have nice business names, and then prevent the robbery that goes by the name of pick-pocketing, burglary, and the like. But they can’t. Most people think that men can be made to pay their debts or their taxes by law. But they can’t. Most people think that sobriety

⁵ The Tammany Society was the New York organization of the Democratic Party that became the ruling political machine of that state, beginning in 1800 and determining the winning electoral candidates and political patronage until the 1960’s. At the time of Pentecost’s present speech, Tammany Hall, the society’s office building on West 14th Street, was at the peak of its power and totally controlled the city’s politics.