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Anarchism and the Catholic Worker

Jim Consedine

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One of the principle guiding influences within the development of Catholic Worker philosophy has been the principle of anarchism. The three most influential figures of the Catholic Worker- Peter Maurin, Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy – all professed to being anarchists at some time in their lives. Since any discussion of anarchism usually produces huge negativity, it is useful to reflect on its influence within the history of the CW.

Peter Maurin, always accepted himself privately as an anarchist but preferred to call himself ‘a personalist’. Individual freedom and personal responsibility sat at the heart of his anarchism. His ideas had been greatly influenced by the famous Russian anarchist of the late 19th century, Peter Kropotkin, who published a series of articles in 1890 called Mutual Aid. In these Kropotkin attacked the notion widely held at the time that competition was the secret to advancement, and that only the strong should survive. Maurin developed ideas which promoted a respect for every individual regardless of strength or ability and that mutual aid and co-operation were much better principles than competition when it came to

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‘building a new society within the shell of the old’, which was an old trade union phrase he adopted.

Maurin felt that people’s creative freedom was essential to their growth as individuals; hence any type of coercion was anathema to his way of thinking. But with freedom went personal responsibility. So communism and socialism per se couldn’t offer a proper way forward since they didn’t allow the individual the opportunity to develop the way he felt they should. Kropotkin’s Fields, Factories and Workshops introduced Maurin to the idea of the need for scholars and workers to share each other’s work experiences so each could understand the other. This would overcome intellectual elitism and would lead to a balance in life and mutual respect. This was an idea that later became part of the CW philosophy.

What did ‘personalism’ mean to Maurin and Dorothy Day? It meant several things, principal among them being the notion of ‘putting on Christ’ and being transformed by the Gospel. Whatever their ideology, above all else both Peter and Dorothy were thoroughly Christian in their response to the needs of their times. This response came from a mixture of their reflections on the scriptures and the Catholic Church’s abundance of social teaching, coupled to an ideology which was informed more by anarchist thinkers than any other. Putting on Christ was an act of freedom which materialist ideologies – communism, socialism, capitalism – hindered, but which anarchism with its corner stone of respect for the individual and challenge to dominance by the state held great appeal. It also meant pacifism and the daily practice of non-violence which they took straight from the Gospels.

Musing in her diary in August 1951, Dorothy Day reflects that anarchism must reflect love not hatred, self-government rather than imposed government, respect for the dignity of people made in the image of God and give recognition to peoples’ ability to work and be creative without judgment. For her, anarchism flows from the Gospels – and love through service sits at its heart, ‘because Christ is our brother.’ ‘The true anarchist asks nothing for

himself; he is self disciplined, accepting the Cross, without asking sympathy, without complaint. The true anarchist loves his brother according to the new law, ready to die rather than compel his brother to go his totalitarian way, no matter how convinced his way is the only way.' (Diaries, Duty of Delight, p166-167) It also meant that the revolution began from the bottom up and didn't have to wait for the overthrow of the established order.

Another major influence on CW thinking was Ammon Hennacy, an anarchist and self-styled 'one man revolution.' Ammon came late to the movement but had an immediate impact. He was a conscientious objector and had been jailed for two years in solitary confinement during the First World War. There he studied the scriptures, taking to heart the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6) as the guiding principle for his life. Like Day and Maurin, he too was moulded by the conflicting ideologies of the times and was clear in his opposition to capitalism, socialism and communism and particular to the wars they engendered. He too saw personalism, the dignity of the individual and pacifism as paramount to building 'a new social order'.

Though from time to time Day and Maurin did acknowledge anarchism as the principle source of ideology behind the CW, they downplayed it somewhat because of the negativity surrounding it. It is clear that they were keen not to be associated with any form of anarchism which led to violence. Nor was Day opposed to organization if it led to better results. But she did want radical decentralization and subsidiarity, the delegation to smaller groups what could be done by mutual aid at local level.

I think it is fair to say that for both Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin faith always came before ideology. It was from the Gospels that both found their cornerstone principles of love, justice, non-violence, pacifism and care for the poor. If Christ was the engine providing power and direction, anarchism was the carriage coupled to complete the train. It was as though they had a faith to live and share, and looked around for an ideology which would best

accommodate them. Anarchism, with its respect for the dignity of each individual, its approach to decentralization, self government and self responsibility, provided the best framework.