

Confessions of an Irish Catholic anarchist...

Jon Hatch

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With election time on the horizon, the descriptive terms in the title start coming up in conversation more and more frequently. And yes, it is all correct; I'm an Irish citizen, a devout Catholic and a committed anarchist. To the average person, that might seem incongruous- certainly the last two- even absurd. But it is all correct.

Needless to say, questions come thick and fast:

How I can remain in the hierarchical Catholic Church- which prizes devotion and obedience above just about everything- and embrace a political outlook that rejects hierarchies and embraces liberty and free thought?

Doesn't anarchism reject organization altogether in favour of chaotic rebellion?

Can you really be part of a hierarchical church- a very often reactionary and intolerant one- and still maintain your own liberty and autonomy, both of which sacrosanct to anarchists?

'No Gods, No Masters' and 'I believe in God the Father Almighty'... Can you actually hold on to both?

My personal answer comes from years of lived experience, thousands of pages, dozens of interactions, and much contemplation. It comes from discovery and investigation of the rich seam of radical thought within Christian teaching and history- the worker priests of France; the Catholic Worker movement of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin; the theology of Jacques Ellul and Nicolai Berdyaev; the philosophy of Leo Tolstoy... So the thoughts I'll give here are relatively brief, but there's plenty to explore...

... In the words of one Jewish carpenter, 'seek and you shall find'...

First of all, we need to establish, what is anarchism? Briefly, anarchism is a system of social thought that holds that the natural state of humanity is freedom and that any form of authoritarianism, coercion, oppression, or slavery is violence and murder. Anarchism aims to bring about the maximum of human freedom possible and therefore- obviously- envisions fundamental changes to how we think about and manage our society.

Contrary to the common assumption, anarchists are not opposed to management or organization; on the contrary, anarchism is a method of organization first and foremost. At its root, anarchism is a critique of centralized power, and one specific form of centralized power in particular- the 'State'. That's a complicated opinion to hold, as the centralized 'State' is the only form of social organization that any of us has ever known and it's extremely difficult to contemplate life without it.

Nevertheless, anarchists maintain that the centralized, bureaucratic, militarized 'State' commodifies, coerces, and curtails human freedom to such an extent- right up to killing us if it sees fit- that any supposed 'benefits' it allegedly provides are moot.

While anarchists are opposed to centralized power, they do draw distinctions between 'power' and 'authority'. 'Power' is the ability to do or act, usually through force of will or concerted might. 'Authority', on the other hand, flows from expertise or knowledge. I invite a plumber into my home because he or she is an authority on water and heating systems. The toilet gets fixed and the plumber leaves. If, however, the toilet gets fixed and the plumber decides to move into my house, 'authority' would have morphed into abusive power, and would need to be actively resisted.

So, while other political expressions talk about seizing power, consolidating power, or wielding power, anarchists focus on diffusing it, distributing it, getting it into as many hands as possible. Power, reason the anarchists, is like manure: spread it around and it helps things to grow; put it all in one place and it's a big pile of, well, manure.

And anarchists like the idea of growth. Most of the political spectrum tends to see society as a structure-something built or constructed, and into which humans must be fitted and conditioned; anarchists tend to see society as an organism- growing, moving, flowing- in which humans need to live in balance, equally, and equitably, 'from each according to ability, to each according to need.'

This is all crucial to me as a Catholic. At the heart of my tradition is the person of Jesus as we see him presented in the biblical text. In the Gospels, Jesus appears not as an emperor, a general, or even a religious scholar, but as a poor man, a worker in a small town, later an itinerant teacher. Anarchists don't think that was by chance; God was modeling something... something utterly transformative.

In the Gospels, Jesus appears constantly at odds with the powers that be. He was a friend of sinners, almost always to be found with those with no influence or perceived social or political importance.

In the Gospels, Jesus appears utterly indifferent to influence or power. Far from assuming, seizing, or even desiring power, Jesus empties himself of power and takes the form of a servant of all, making clear to his followers that they should do likewise.

In the Gospels, the God of whom Jesus constantly speaks- the God he calls 'Father' and teaches his followers to call 'Father'- is never presented as a Master who imposes his will on us or who regards us as inferiors. Indeed, Jesus is clear that 'I and the Father are one; if you have seen me, you have seen the Father;' (St. John 10:30; 14:9).

As a Christian anarchist, I see the incarnation itself- the entire life of the man Jesus in the biblical text- as a critique of power personified. It was so revolutionary, in fact, that the powers that be killed him for it. But even the Empire couldn't end the story, and those of us who call ourselves Christians and anarchists seek to live as 'Easter people', living a revolutionary programme of love, kindness, generosity, inclusion, justice, and resistance;

... Just as we see Jesus doing.

If none of this sounds like the Catholic Church, I understand, and I agree. If there is any one thought that comes to mind when thinking about the Jesus of the Gospel vs. the Vatican, it's that something has gone terribly wrong, and it seems to have gone wrong very early. It didn't take long for the Church to become a 'State'- powerful, rich, and coercive.

As an anarchist, I put the blame for that squarely on the Church's cultivation of power and control. But as an anarchist, I believe it's possible to organize without centralized, coercive power. The original model of a bishop in the biblical text and early church tradition was that of a shepherd, a father, a wise organizer. When these gifts were recognized, they were put to use.

For Catholic anarchists, the role of, say, a bishop is not about prestige or (especially) power, but about organizational authority. People in power are not the enemy; power itself is, particularly and especially power in only a few hands. I have no problem with archbishops or bishops as an idea. If love is their law, which is what I see in the person of Jesus, I'm satisfied.

I believe in God, and I believe that God gives gifts of leadership, wisdom, and organization. I do, however, believe God gives those gifts to all people- not just to the white ones, the rich ones, the male ones, the straight ones, the American ones, or the European ones.

Regardless of the whole bloated, coercive, bureaucratic, and officious pile of manure, Christian anarchists are stubbornly, inexorably drawn to the person of Jesus, the tantalizing idea that another world is possible. If Jesus was anything like the picture we have in the text, then the Kingdom of God is broad, inclusive and growing... and we can be as well.

And if the hierarchy of the Church doesn't model love, equality and justice, why is it up to *me* to leave the Church? The Catholic tradition is vast, diverse, beautiful, and very precious to me; it is my home. As Dorothy Day- another Catholic and anarchist- said, 'As to the Church, where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ, one flesh with Christ? Though she is a harlot at times, she is our Mother.'

Perhaps being a Catholic and an anarchist is about embracing contradictions, living in the tension of what is and what might be. In Christianity, this is the essence of faith and hope. Our faith must be lived in the reality of what is, even if that reality is arrogant, oppressive power. But the Kingdom of God is a praxis, a reflection of what might be- love, openness, justice- and active resistance to what is, in the light of faith and commitment.

I wouldn't know how to be a Catholic without being an anarchist... or vice versa.

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