Anarchism and Christianity

Plea for a differentiated view

Sebastian Kalicha

2010s

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> "It is taken for granted that anarchists are hostile to all religions […]. It is also taken for granted that devout Christians abhor anarchy as the source of chaos and the negation of established power. It is these simplistic and unquestioned assumptions that I intend to challenge."[1]
> — Jacques Ellul

For many, discussing anarchism that is Christian seems just as unfamiliar as discussing a Christianity that is anarchist. Nevertheless, the political-religious movement of Christian anarchism, appearing in various forms, has long existed. Many movements and personalities, both historically and presently, pursue the idea of a libertarian Christianity and emphatically point out that anarchism and Christianity need not be mutually exclusive ideologies. On the contrary, once a certain approach has been found, they converge in content rather than diverge. But what exactly does the term "Christian anarchism" mean? What does a Christianity that claims (or that others claim) to be anarchist look like? How does it reconcile with "classical" anarchism, which is commonly perceived as non-religious or anti-religious? And how does it reconcile with a Christianity that has a reputation for being incompatible with socialisms of any kind?

A succinct characterization of Christian anarchism—if one dares to formulate such a thing in a few sentences—could look like this: Christianity is understood in a way that ultimately amounts to something in political and social questions that politically active members of the labor movement of the late 19th century began to call "anarchism" or "libertarian socialism"—not despite, but because of what is written in the Bible. It is an anarchism that derives from the Bible and the life and work of Jesus. The Bible and the message of Jesus thus serve as a basis for arriving at similar or the same conclusions as those formulated by anarchist theorists: to view the state with all its institutions and representatives as illegitimate, to reject capitalism as an economic system, and to implement an egalitarian, decentralized, and non-violent social order, free from oppression and exploitation, in its place. The French sociologist and philosopher Jacques Ellul, who has contributed significantly to Christian-anarchist theory, writes in this sense that "biblical thought leads directly to anarchism."[2]

But a particular exegesis of the Bible does not necessarily always have to be the focus or serve as the exclusive starting point for a libertarian understanding of Christianity. For the Catholic Worker movement—one of the best-known examples of how even Catholic Christians can relate positively to anarchism—for example, in addition to a libertarian understanding of the Bible, it was always clear that they drew on numerous different political and philosophical doctrines and currents of the left, the combination and blending of which ultimately gave rise to this new movement, which ultimately came to be called "Christian-anarchist." One of the founders of the Catholic Worker movement, Peter Maurin, for example, was strongly influenced by three schools of thought, namely the French personalists (Emmanuel Mounier, Jacques Maritain), the Russian anarchists (Peter Kropotkin, Leo Tolstoy)[3] and the English distributionists (Eric Gill, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc).[4] The traces left by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)

[1] Ellul 1998, p. 1.

[2] Ellul 1980, 15.

[3] At this point, Nikolai Berdyaev should also be mentioned. Although he did not call himself an anarchist, his philosophy nevertheless has libertarian tendencies. He is generally considered one of the leading representatives of personalism in Russia.

[4] See Bokenkotter 1998, 412. From Christian history, Francis of Assisi is also considered an important reference point for Maurin, to whom he frequently referred in his famous Easy Essays, which he wrote for the newspaper The

trade union, of which the influential Catholic Workers Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy were members, have left in the actions and political priorities of the Catholic Worker movement are also evident.[5] If one takes a closer look at the Catholic Workers' understanding of anarchism, the picture is again one that requires differentiation and specification. The Catholic Workers are influenced neither by "Stimer's extreme individualism" nor by "Bakunin's belief in the creative and redemptive power of violence and destruction," but very much by "the pacifist anarchism of Tolstoy, the communist anarchism of Kropotkin, and [...] the mutualism of Proudhon."[6] This is not, of course, to claim that anarchism and Christianity are essentially the same. The historical and intellectual roots of Christianity and anarchism are, of course, different, but this does not necessarily stand in the way of an anarchist understanding of Christianity, which is what Ciaron O'Reilly, also an activist in the Catholic Worker movement, means when he writes that "the premise of anarchism is inherent in Christianity and the message of the Gospels."[7]

On the relationship between anarchism and Christianity

The mainstream of the Christian churches is known to be traditionally skeptical or even hostile towards socialist ideas. Anarchist and socialist movements have often defined themselves through their atheism and materialism; they derived their enlightened and progressive self-image precisely from their rejection of religion and church. Nevertheless, there is often enough reason in both communities to question this preconceived idea. On the Christian side, in addition to the movements and individuals who explicitly call themselves Christian-anarchist, there are various movements such as the Diggers, the Doukhobors, the Quakers[8], liberation theology[9] but also medieval religious movements such as the Waldensians (who were branded as heretics by the church and persecuted accordingly). While those mentioned here were or are not anarchists in the sense of self-description (often simply because the word anarchism only appeared in connection with a political and social movement in the 19th century), a libertarian and progressive dimension can certainly be found here, which should make it easy for anarchists to relate to them positively. On the anarchist side, there were and are various individuals and groups who, based on their biblical exegesis, various heretical movements, or a positive reference to the early Christian communities, among other things, recognized a libertarian dimension in Christianity – even if they themselves were not necessarily religious or believers.

Nevertheless, Christian anarchists do not always have it easy, because in those communities – anarchist and Christian – whose ideological doctrines they attempt to bring together in various ways, this very endeavor is often met with skepticism or, in the worst case, outright rejection.

Catholic Worker (see Maurin 1949). Some even called him the "Francis of Assisi of the 20th century." For discussions on the Maurin-Francis of Assisi relationship, see, among others, York 2009, 53ff.

[5] A good example of how Christian and revolutionary socialist ideas merged here is that the Christian works of mercy were understood by the Catholic Workers as direct action.

[6] Segers 1978, 211.

[7] O'Reilly 1982, 9.

[8] An interesting recent connection between Quakerism and anarchism is represented by the Movement for a New Society (MNS) in the USA, which emerged from the A Quaker Action Group in 1971. Although dissolved in 1988, the MNS is considered an important driving force for contemporary US anarchism. For this discussion, see Cornell 2011.

[9] Although liberation theology is generally considered to be more Marxist-oriented, there is also research on anarchist elements within this movement. See Damico 1987.

Dave Andrews, for example, points out that in a contemporary Bible translation, the "Antichrist" was translated as "anarchist." Therefore, he argues, it is "understandable why so many Christians see anarchists as their archenemies."[10] Although such terminology is telling, the entire topic goes far beyond that. Anarchism sees itself as a revolutionary and libertarian form of socialism, and it is widely known how strained the relationship between Christianity (or the Church) and socialism has been and continues to be, even if there have always been laudable exceptions to this norm. In the anarchist movement—and this is also anything but a secret—anti-clerical or anti-religious beliefs have a strong and long tradition. One can look at any anarchist classic from the late 19th or early 20th century; statements against church and religion are almost always missing, which is why a negative attitude towards religion is often considered an anarchist "essential." Let's take one of the most famous anarchists, Michael Bakunin: In God and the State, he warns that religion "stupidifies and corrupts peoples" and that it kills reason, "this main instrument of human liberation," in people. He concludes: "If God exists, man is a slave; but man can and should be free: consequently, God does not exist."[11] Or Erich Mühsam: He sees religion and the state as intertwined instruments of oppression and writes in The Liberation of Society from the State that "God and the state […] are the two poles of power" that are "based on the negation of equality, reciprocity, and personal responsibility."[12] It is pointless, given the already widely known anti-clerical and anti-religious arguments in the anarchist movement, to point further to various writings of this kind, some of which drifted into polemics such as Johann Most's Die Gottesplast (The Plague of God), since they are in any case far better known than differentiated positions on the topic, which are to be given space here.

For: As rigid as these quotations may sound, and as many anarchists may believe, the libertarian front against everything religious is not. Peter Kropotkin – one of the most important representatives of communist anarchism and certainly far from being a Christian anarchist – for example, admits that Christianity was only corrupted by institutionalization when he describes Christianity as "the revolt against imperial Rome," which was defeated "by the same Rome" by "adopting its maxims, customs, and language" and thus becoming "Roman law."[13] He even went further and wrote that "there were undoubtedly serious anarchist elements in the Christian movement." However, the "anarchist content," which he located in the "beginnings" of Christianity, disappeared for him when "this movement gradually degenerated into a church."[14] This argumentation does not, in fact, distinguish him from many Christian anarchist theorists. It was also Kropotkin who, in his article on anarchism for the Encyclopædia Britannica (eleventh ed.), considered the early Hussites, the Anabaptists, and the theologian Hans Denck[15] worthy of positive mention.

Another communist anarchist, Pierre Ramus, openly expressed sympathy for (anti-clerical) Christian anarchism of the Tolstoyan persuasion, for libertarian Christianity, and for the message of Jesus, especially the Sermon on the Mount.[16] In a 1920 article published in the journal Erkenntnis und Befreiung (Recognition and Liberation), Ramus writes: "The existing system of

[10] Andrews 2005, 55.
[11] Bakunin 2007, 51.
[12] Mühsam 1973, 38.
[13] Kropotkin 1896a
[14] Kropotkin 1913, 30.
[15] Kropotkin also addresses Denck in "The Historical Role of the State." See Kropotkin 1896b, 45.
[16] See, among others, Müller-Kampel 2005, 32–37; Pavlic 2009, 30–33.

violence is based on the use of violence by the masses in all individual and social spheres, and this use stems from the proletariat's erroneous, spiritless worship of violence, which is artificially cultivated by the state, schools, militarism, the church, the party, and the demagogic lust for power. The moment the proletariat refuses to use the violence it demands in all spheres of the existing order of violence—and therein lies the essence of Christianity, as Tolstoy teaches—this entire order of violence collapses helplessly, and, perhaps most importantly, no new one emerges—man and society are finally liberated, free."[17]

Another author adds in the anarchist journal Wohlstand für Alle: "For Leo Tolstoy, religion is not a visually perceptible concept of God, nor the veneration of any figure of Jesus, a biblical word, or a relic. All these are the outward appearances that the church commercially propagates. For Tolstoy, religion is: a true life in the service of the well-being of one's fellow human being, in the service of fulfilling a higher duty, devoting oneself and one's whole being to the realization of the good. What this means to him, one knows when one knows the ideal of anarchism […]."[18]

In another article in the journal Erkenntnis und Befreiung (Insight and Liberation), an author completely equates Christianity and anarchism: "The doctrine that Christianity proclaims in images and parables of unheard-of poetic splendor – the same doctrine is taught by communist anarchism in the language of science."[19]

Gustav Landauer is also a good example of someone who, although not a Christian anarchist, nevertheless distinguished himself through his sophisticated approach to various facets of Christianity. Landauer, like many other non-religious anarchists, referred positively to Tolstoy and to medieval Christian communities, as well as to the lay theologian Peter Chelčický, who lived during the time of the Hussite movement.[20] He also studied the late medieval theologian and mystic Meister Eckhart extensively, and occasionally made positive references to Jesus himself in short commentaries.[21]

It is clearly evident that, based on this assumption, the relationship between anarchism and Christianity is often presented with the necessary differentiation in recent anarchist literature, and that polemical attacks against everything religious/Christian are avoided. In many standard and introductory works on anarchism, Christian anarchism is mentioned and treated quite naturally as part of the anarchist movement. In Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism, for example, Peter Marshall writes that "despite the opposition of many classical 19th-century anarchist thinkers to Christianity, and despite the close ties between church and state, anarchism […] is by no means inherently anti-religious or anti-Christian." "Like other world religions," Marshall argues, "Christianity has left a mixed legacy, but it has always been, and will undoubtedly continue to be, a source of great inspiration for both anarchism and socialism."[22] Murray Bookchin makes a similar argument when he writes that Christianity has produced "not only a centralized, authoritarian papacy," but also "its antithesis: a quasi-religious anarchism."[23] He

[17] Ramus 1920, 2

[18] Weidner 1908. No page reference.

[19] Sonnenfeld 1921, 2.

[20] See Landauer 2003, 66f. For more detailed discussion (Landauer's and in general) on Peter Chelčický and the Hussite movement, see the article by Gustav Wagner and Sebastian Kalicha "Peter Chelčický and the Web of Faith. On the Heretical Tradition of Nonviolent Anarchism" in the book Christian Anarchism: Facets of a Libertarian Movement (Graswurzelrevolution 2013, not yet published), edited by the author.

[21] See Landauer 2010, 293.

[22] Marshall 2008, 85.

[23] Bookchin 2005, 266.

writes of a "mixed message" of Christianity, which he divides into two distinct belief systems, one of which he calls "a radical, activist, communist, and libertarian vision of Christian life."[24] George Woodcock summarizes in Anarchism. A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements summarizes his remarks on Tolstoy and Christian anarchism as follows: "I think I have said enough to illustrate that [...] Tolstoy's social doctrine is true anarchism, which condemns the authoritarian nature of existing society, proposes a new, libertarian order, and indicates the means by which it might be achieved."[25] The historian James Joll goes a step further and, in his book The Anarchists, even attests to a religious dimension to anarchism itself, when he writes that anarchism is "both a religious creed and a rational philosophy."[26] Something similar can also be found in the writings of the British anarchist and atheist Nicolas Walter.[27] This list of examples, which indicate that even in the anarchist movement, generally considered strictly anti-religious, a nuanced view of religion and Christianity is nothing entirely new or even obscure, could be continued.[28]

Similarly nuanced approaches can also be seen on the Christian side. Examples of priests, theologians, or religious figures who repeatedly played an astonishing (and almost forgotten) role in the anarchist movement should also not go unmentioned. While several could be listed here, three examples will be briefly mentioned here, who are probably hardly known to the wider public, but are no less remarkable: Thomas J. Hagerty, Aita Patxi, and Gresham Kirkby.[29] The Catholic priest Thomas J. Hagerty (c. 1862–1920) from the USA was an influential activist and founding member of the aforementioned IWW, in which many anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists participated, although not exclusively. One of the few studies on him states:

"Of the nearly 200 delegates who met in Chicago in June 1905 to found the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), no one was more influential in shaping this new organization than Thomas J. Hagerty, the secretary of the convention's founding committee. Hagerty not only played a leading role in the meeting itself; he was also important, if not crucial, in the preparations for the meeting. He was one of the six individuals who, in the fall of 1904, sent invitations to a select group of union activists to discuss the possibility of forming a revolutionary industrial union. He participated in the discussions when this group met in January 1905; he helped formulate the Industrial Union Manifesto, a call to all workers to revolt against skilled labor privileges and capitalism; he gave the IWW the chart ["Father Hagerty's Wheel of Fortune"; note S.K.] for its industrial union structure; and for six months prior to this meeting, he was the editor of Voice of Labor, the official press organ of the American Labor Union, in which he convincingly argued the merits of industrial unionism.[30]

And even during the Spanish Civil War, when the Catholic Church, allied with Spanish fascism under Franco, faced various socialist, communist, and anarchist militias, the Catholic priest

[24] Bookchin 2005, 274f.

[25] Woodcock 2009, 194.

[26] Joll 1966, 8.

[27] He writes: "Revolutionary anarchism, just like revolutionary socialism, has quasi-religious traits [...]" Walter 2011, 281.

[28] For examples of religious-anarchist movements outside of Christianity, see, among others: Christoyannopoulos 2009, 202–318; Veneuse 2009. Jewish anarchism is a comprehensive topic in itself and cannot be discussed further here due to the scope of this topic.

[29] It must be pointed out at this point, however, that there are many such examples and that this selective selection is only due to which people the author considered suitable to be mentioned here in the necessary brevity.

[30] Doherty 1962, 39.

Aita Patxi (1910–1974) sided with the republican forces—always unarmed, carrying only a heavy, portable altar. He was "not a supporter of Franco. As a Catholic and a Basque, he stood on the side of the Republic, the Basque militias, communists, socialists, and anarchists." He was ultimately captured by, of all people, a Catholic priest fighting on the Franco side. "Aita Patxi's horror at seeing a fellow believer with a drawn weapon is surpassed only by the anger of the Francoists that a priest could align himself with the 'Reds.'"[31]

The English priest Gresham Kirkby (1916–2006) is also a striking example of the role of priests in the anarchist/socialist movement. He was an active supporter of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and a member of the anti-militarist British group Committee of 100, which had anarchist tendencies and included many well-known anarchists such as Nicolas Walter, Alex Comfort, and Herbert Read, as well as the libertarian philosopher Bertrand Russell. He was strongly influenced by Peter Kropotkin and Dorothy Day, called himself an "anarchist communist" (or, after 1956, an "anarchist socialist"), and even on his deathbed, he testified to his "undying faith in anarchy."[32]

A summary of the relationship between anarchism and Christianity could therefore be that the main argumentative motif in many anarchist classics against Christianity – as we have already seen – is usually that the church and the state are the two institutions that jointly strive to maintain their power and consequently try to keep people in a state of oppression with regulations and various religious (false) teachings. Historically, the conclusion that the institution of the church has shamefully exploited its position of power in various eras is quite correct, and it is not surprising that anarchists in particular vehemently opposed such a concentration of power. At the same time, however, a closer look reveals that even among the anarchist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, which is generally considered to be strictly anti-religious, there are often positions that cast this often unchallenged picture in a different light.[33] Anarchists have also apparently often neglected considerations of how the situation changes when Christians begin to doubt, even openly criticize or reject, these symbioses of church and state (as was the case in pre-secular times), of religion and (institutionalized) power, and invoke the Bible just as much as those who justify all this with the Bible. There are plenty of examples of this. Another aspect that is frequently raised is the question of God. In anarchist circles, belief in a god is understood as the conscious acceptance of domination and authority, which is said to be incompatible with anarchist values. This question of God, of course, stands and falls with the question of one's concept of God – and here, too, there are numerous views that are relatively rarely discussed in relevant debates.[34]

[31] Baxmeyer 2007. Elsewhere, Baxmeyer writes on the question of Christianity in the Spanish Civil War: "In fact, the relationship of historical anarchism to the Christian religion was never as clear-cut as its hostility towards the Church. The attempts of the anarchists during the Civil War to claim religious and ecclesiastical collective symbols for the 'eternal Spain of anarchy' as symbols of national identity are far less surprising when one realizes that practically since the movement's inception, there have been contacts between anarchist ideology and Christian values and morals, which the anarchists, even in Spain, recognized far more openly than members of other left-wing revolutionary currents." Baxmeyer 2012, 422.

[32] Leech 2006.

[33] Even in Spanish anarcho-syndicalism during the civil war, we find differentiated approaches: "There was indeed irreconcilable and often murderous hostility between the churches as social power actors and the anarchists [in the Spanish Civil War; S.K.]. This did not, however, mean an equally radical rejection of Christianity. Entirely focused on the present, political resistance, and the benefits for social coexistence, anarchists could relate positively to Christian values and moral concepts without getting into ideological conflicts." Baxmeyer 2012, 427. Emphasis S.K.

[34] Some comments on this far-reaching topic can be found in the unabridged version of this article.

For a differentiated view

In a speech on the subject of religion and anarchism, the British anarchist and atheist Nicolas Walter, after listing no fewer than 35 anarchists and their rejection of religion and explaining their stories, summed up the relationship between anarchism and Christianity, unsurprisingly, by saying that "there is indeed a strong correlation between anarchism and atheism." However, he added that this was "not complete and not necessary." He therefore also mentioned some Christian anarchists or anarchists with a more nuanced approach to the topic, such as Leo Tolstoy, Dorothy Day[35], Paul Goodman, or Herbert Read, and added: "Most anarchists are non-religious or anti-religious—and most take their atheism for granted—but some anarchists are religious." He therefore concludes that there are "numerous legitimate libertarian views on religion."[36] And it is precisely these numerous legitimate libertarian views on religion that are at issue here; in this case, a nuanced view of Christianity, which is certainly worthwhile, as there is undoubtedly much to discover here from a left-wing, progressive, and anarchist perspective. The same applies to Christians who have so far steered clear of anarchism.

A wise assessment of the relationship between anarchism and Christianity was published in a special issue of the anarchist journal Graswurzelrevolution. It states that "the refusal to recognize a clearly recognizable Jesus-like politics of renunciation of power and violence [...] has such tragic consequences" because even "the vast majority of anarchists have not yet grasped that this Jesus-like politics also contains a unique conception for its supporters."[37]

This text is a heavily abridged and slightly modified version of the article "Dimensions of Libertarian Exegesis." Reflections on the Relationship between Anarchism and Christianity," which will be published in the anthology "Christian Anarchism: Facets of a Libertarian Movement," edited by Sebastian Kalicha. The anthology will be published in spring 2013 by Graswurzelrevolution.

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[35] As a committed atheist, Walter even had the courage to write a touching obituary for Dorothy Day. He called her "one of the greatest anarchists, pacifists, Christians, Americans, women—human beings—of our time," adding that when Day gave a speech to anarchists in London in 1963, she "said nothing we would disagree with." Walter 2011, 257ff.; emphasis in the original.

[36] Walter 2011, 284.

[37] Haller 1990, 15.

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