

Christian anarchism

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Class struggle, anti-fascism and the peace movement

A succinct characterization of Christian anarchism could be as follows: Christianity is understood in a way that ultimately amounts to something in political and social questions that political activists in the labor movement of the late 19th century began to call "anarchism" or "libertarian socialism." 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 regard 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 a lot to Christian anarchist theory, writes in this sense that "biblical thought leads directly to anarchism."

Libertarian Catholics

But a particular exegesis of the Bible does not necessarily have to be the focus or serve as the sole starting point for a libertarian understanding of Christianity. For example, for the Catholic Worker movement - which is one of the best-known examples of how even Catholic Christians can relate positively to anarchism - it was always clear, in addition to a libertarian understanding of the Bible, that they were drawing on numerous different political and philosophical ideas and currents of the left, the combination and fusion of which ultimately gave rise to this new movement that was ultimately 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) and the English distributists (Eric Gill, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc).

The traces left by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) union, of which the influential Catholic Workers Dorothy Day and Ammon Hennacy were members, in the actions and political priorities of the Catholic Worker movement are also evident. 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 [...] by the mutualism of Proudhon".

The claim here is not that anarchism and Christianity are essentially the same. The historical and intellectual roots of Christianity and anarchism are different, but this does not have to stand in the way of an anarchist understanding of Christianity. Some authors argue that Christian anarchism is not about "bringing two systems of thought together," but is simply "an attempt to put the message of the gospel into practice." Ciaron O'Reilly, also an activist in the Catholic Worker movement, aptly says that "the premise of anarchism is inherent in Christianity and the message of the gospel." We will try to find out exactly how this manifests itself. First, however, we will discuss the relationship between anarchism and Christianity and take a more differentiated look at it.

Criticism of the church

In the anarchist movement, anti-clerical or anti-religious beliefs have a strong and long tradition. You 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 seen as an anarchist "essential". Let's take one of the best known anarchists, Michael Bakunin: In "God and the State" he warns that religion "stupidifies and corrupts peoples" and that it kills reason, "this main tool 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.« Or Erich Mühsam: He sees religion and the state as interwoven 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 denial of equality, reciprocity and personal responsibility«. Given the already widely known anti-clerical and anti-religious arguments in the anarchist movement, it is pointless to point out various writings of this kind, some of which drifted into polemics such as Johann Most's »The Plague of God«, since they are usually far more well-known than differentiated positions on the topic, which are to be given space here.

Because: The libertarian front against everything religious is not as rigid as it may sound in these quotes and as many anarchists may believe. 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 rebellion against imperial Rome" which was defeated "by the same Rome" by "adopting its maxims, customs and language" and thus becoming "Roman law". He even went further and wrote that there were "undoubtedly serious anarchist elements in the Christian movement". However, the "anarchist content" that he located in the "beginnings" of Christianity disappeared for him when "this movement [gradually] degenerated into a church". This argument does not actually 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 (also Anabaptists or Re-Anabaptists) and the theologian Hans Denck worthy of mention in a positive sense. (...) The well-known American anarchist Voltairine de Cleyre also went through an interesting process of reflection on religious questions. She herself "once bravely asserted that no one can be an anarchist and at the same time believe in God." But she goes on to write that she sees "the line of argument which I previously found so convincing," that "anarchism, as a rejection of all authority over the individual," cannot "coexist with belief in a God," contradicted by "the case of Leo Tolstoy, who, precisely because of his belief in God, comes to the conclusion that no one has the right to rule over others, precisely because he believes that we are all equal children of the one Father and therefore no one has the right to rule over anyone else," and at the same time points to "many examples" "where the same idea has been developed by a whole group of believers."

Labor movement

The Catholic priest Thomas J. Hagerty (ca. 1862–1920) from the USA was an influential activist and founding member of the IWW, which has already been mentioned in the context of the Catholic Worker movement and in which many anarchists and anarcho-syndicalists are involved.

One of the few studies about him states: "Of the almost 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 meeting'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 people who sent invitations to a select group of union activists in the autumn of 1904 to discuss the possibility of founding a revolutionary industrial union; he participated in the discussions when that group met in January 1905; he helped to formulate the Industrial Union Manifesto, a call to all workers to revolt against trade unions and capitalism; he gave the IWW the diagram [Father Hagerty's Wheel of Fortune] for its industrial union structure; and he edited the Voice of Labor, the official press organ of the American Labor Union, for six months before that meeting, in which he convincingly argued the merits of industrial unionism."

And even in the Spanish Civil War, when the Catholic Church, allied with Spanish fascism under Franco, faced the various socialist, communist or anarchist militias, the Catholic priest Aita Patxi (1910-1974) sided with the republican forces - always unarmed, carrying only a heavy, portable altar. He was "not a Franco partisan. As a Catholic and a Basque, he was on the side of the Republic, the Basque militias, communists, socialists and anarchists." He was ultimately captured by a Catholic priest fighting on the Francoist side. "Aita Patxi's horror at seeing a fellow believer with a drawn weapon is only surpassed by the anger of the Francoists that a priest could join forces with the 'Reds'." The English priest Gresham Kirkby (1916-2006) is also an impressive example of the role of priests in the anarchist and 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 in which many well-known anarchists such as Nicolas Walter, Alex Comfort and Herbert Read as well as the libertarian philosopher Bertrand Russell were active. He was strongly influenced by Peter Kropotkin and Dorothy Day, called himself an "anarchist communist" (or after 1956 an "anarchist socialist") and testified on his deathbed to his "immortal belief in anarchy".

Jesus as a Social Rebel

A crucial question in Christian-anarchist contexts is of course how the life and work of Jesus are judged. In general, Jesus is understood in this discourse as a social rebel and non-violent revolutionary - in the sense that he sought a fundamental upheaval of the situation - whose message is still relevant today and whose political maxims can best be described as "anarchistic" under today's circumstances. Countless authors and theologians (who did not necessarily have anarchist approaches) have repeatedly and emphatically pointed to this "political Jesus" and his revolutionary message. The theologian John Howard Yoder, for example, speaks of Jesus as "a model for radical political action" and goes on to say that although Jesus "was not the violent liberator that some had expected," he saw himself as a liberator and used the political language that was expected of him. He "annoyed Herod and the Sadducees, who controlled local politics," but did not resort to "the violence of the state or of war." He and the community he left behind stood for "political innovations" such as "love of enemies" and "elevation of the marginalized." The French Tolstoyan Georges Lechartier ultimately sums up his Christian-anarchist convictions succinctly when he says: "The true founder of anarchy was Jesus Christ and [...] the first anarchist

association was that of the apostles.” No one, according to another anarchist, had ”penetrated so radically to the root of all evil,” no one had ”made such revolutionary demands” as Christ. Jesus ”appears as a rebel and insurrectionist towards all the authorities of this world; his teaching, this silent teaching of love and non-violence, is interpreted with sure instinct by the great and powerful as rebellion and high treason.” Even in the anarchist literature of the Spanish Civil War, ”the positive portrayals of Christ predominate” due to his ”personal actions and characteristics, which in the eyes of many authors make him an anarchist himself, or at least an early fighter for social justice: his solidarity with the socially outcasts, the expulsion of the merchants [= capitalists] from the temple, his provocations of the authorities, his rejection of wealth, etc.”

But can such interpretations and statements actually be derived from the Bible or from theological and/or historical findings about Jesus, or are they merely irrelevant projections without a legitimate basis? Without a doubt, it can at least be stated that the New Testament is sometimes quite clear when it comes to outlining the ideal social order whose coming Jesus predicted. For example, Matthew says: ”Then Jesus called them to him and said, ’You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones abuse their power over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.’”

According to the Bible, the early Christian communities, following such teachings, organized their communities in a way that would certainly seem sympathetic to anarchists, as can be read in the Acts of the Apostles, for example. It says, among other things: ”And all who believed formed a community and had everything in common. They sold their belongings and gave to each one as much as he had need of.” Or: ”The community of believers was of one heart and soul. No one called anything he had his own, but they had everything in common.” It is evident that the Gospels are generally negative about material wealth, about the rich and the injustices that this brings about. Jesus, who is known to have often expressed himself in parables and metaphors, spoke so clearly and unambiguously on hardly any other topic.

The Kingdom of God

Some theorists also see the way in which Jesus resisted the Roman occupation and the local rulers of his time, and the options he did not consider, as an indication that the reference to anarchism appears legitimate. He refused to cooperate with the Roman occupying power and accept the resulting financial advantages, as was the case with the Sadducees. He also refused to strive for reforms in the existing, oppressive system, as the Pharisees did. Nor did he completely isolate himself from the society he considered misguided in order to be able to lead a ”pure” life apart from it, as the Essenes did. And last but not least, he also rejected the armed revolutionary struggle propagated by the Jewish resistance fighters of the Zealots. Jesus strove for a complete overthrow of the prevailing conditions and an egalitarian social order, and tried to achieve this exclusively by means of radical and consistent non-violence. He did all this with the aim of pointing out to all people the possibility open to them of entering the ”Kingdom of God” here and now. (...) Dave Andrews finds examples in the Old Testament (in this case 1 Sam 8:4-22) of a supposedly critical character of God: ”He is a tireless opponent of a political system that governs from top to bottom, is centralized and disempowers people, especially those at the bottom of

society. And he warns the people of Israel against returning to the form of government that they left behind in Egypt, because otherwise people would become 'slaves'." For Ammon Hennacy, God is "not an authority that I obey like a monarch, but a principle of good, as set out by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount." Similarities to Hennacy can be seen here with the understanding of God of the (Marxist-oriented) Mexican liberation theologian José Porfirio Miranda, who was of the opinion that God is justice and vice versa. Miranda did not understand God as a "being" of any kind, but as an ethical commandment for justice.

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