

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement

Sebastian Kalicha

Sebastian Kalicha
Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement
2012

Retrieved on February 1, 2025 from
<https://www.anarchismus.at/religionskritik/christliche-religionen/7008-dorothy-day-und-die-catholic-worker-bewegung>

theanarchistlibrary.org

2012

Contents

In the tension between libertarian socialism and Catholic traditionalism	5
Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day	6
Religion and Politics	7
The Catholic Worker und Houses of Hospitality	9
Activism	9
Dorothy Day: an anarchist life?	10
Final remarks	11

libertarian character of the CW comes into play, because all CW communities are autonomous and so there are also groups, houses of hospitality or farms that clearly distance themselves from the understanding of religion as presented by Day and Maurin. This can even go so far that some houses have little interest in the Catholic Church.

Despite the obvious contradictions that remain when one deals with the CW movement from an anarchist (but also Christian) perspective, the libertarian character cannot be overlooked. The influences of anarchism and socialism on the movement since its beginnings in the early 1930s are obvious.

This tradition continues in CW communities today, although there have been some heated debates about it within CW. They were and are part of the Christian anarchist scene and thus also of the anarchist movement. If you see the diversity of the anarchist scene as a strength and not a hindrance, the CW are an interesting addition to this movement, which has always been heterogeneous.

In the tension between libertarian socialism and Catholic traditionalism

Christian anarchism has been a movement within the heterogeneous anarchist movement since Leo Tolstoy at the latest, and most anarchists are familiar with at least the basics. The Catholic Worker movement is part of this Christian anarchist spectrum. Based on the newly published Dorothy Day biography *All Is Grace. A Biography of Dorothy Day* by Jim Forest, this article attempts to provide an insight into the world of the Catholic Workers (CW) as well as the life and work of Dorothy Day (1897–1980) — one of the founders of the CW — and then deals with the libertarian-socialist aspects of this movement and this person.

In the Christian anarchist scene, the CW are something special because they associate anarchism not only with Christianity, but even with Catholicism.

The fact that the CW are seen as an important part of this scene despite this deviation from usual Christian-anarchist concepts is illustrated by a look at some standard anarchist works. For example, they are mentioned as an anarchist movement in Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible. A History of Anarchism* and in George Woodcock's *Anarchism. A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements*.

Critical positions of non-religious anarchists on the CW are not new and understandable, but far too often they obscure a view of this movement, its activities and its activists that is not accompanied by prejudice from the outset.

Here we try to take a sober look at the CW and its libertarian aspects. The focus is deliberately not on what one could criticize about the CW from the point of view of the “anarchist purist”.

This exercise has been done many times — quite polemically — and this debate does not need another contribution of this kind. Here, we take into account the fact that the CW — despite their

Catholicism — openly profess libertarian ideas and the influence that anarchism had on their founders Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin. On this basis, we try to explore the libertarian character of the CW and Dorothy Day and how it interacted with, but also clashed with, their Catholicism.

Peter Maurin and Dorothy Day

If you look at the history of the CW, you will find a lot of libertarian socialism. Formally, it all began in 1933 with a newspaper called *The Catholic Worker*, which was founded in New York by the French-born Peter Maurin and the American Dorothy Day.

Peter Maurin, like Dorothy Day, was strongly influenced by Peter Kropotkin and represented two ideas in particular: those of “personalism” and the “green revolution”.

“Personalism” refers to an idea that says that the first and most fundamental revolution that must take place must be that of the “self”. One should live the revolutionary maxims that one represents as far as possible, i.e. revolutionize oneself, one’s thoughts and actions. If more and more individuals took this step, one would be closer to the actual social revolution.

The famous Christian anarchist, later CW activist and companion of Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, would later formulate this again with his theory of the One-Man Revolution.

Maurin understood the “green revolution” to mean a society that was to be decentralized and organized in an egalitarian manner in rural areas as self-sufficiently as possible in order to create an alternative to the existing society — Christian-anarchist communes. He developed these theories not only on the basis of socialist and anarchist literature, but the Bible and theological writings also had at least as strong an influence (Peter Maurin always had a long list of books ready that he recommended and which can be viewed on Wikipedia, for example).

When you look at her life, it seems that Gustav Landauer probably best described the ethos of Dorothy Day and the CW when he said — long before this group was formed — that the state was “a relationship”, a “relationship between people”, “a way in which people behave towards each other”, and that it could be destroyed “by entering into other relationships, by behaving differently towards each other”.

A more apt description of Dorothy Day’s work could hardly be formulated. It was precisely this lever of solidarity and mutual help in interpersonal relationships that she started with — only: she mostly called it “charity” and “compassion”.

Final remarks

With their commitment to Catholicism, the CW are breaking with a tendency that is central to the self-image of most Christian anarchists: religion yes; church no.

The rejection of institutionalized religion as an anarchist statement against power and hierarchy seems to be a decisive point for many non-religious anarchists, which makes it easier for them to see Christian anarchists as part of the movement (although in general the definitions and parameters of who can or cannot be considered an anarchist are controversial).

Committing to Catholicism logically opens the door to denying the CW their anarchist status, as it inevitably implies some things that can safely be described as “non-anarchist”.

Even in the person of Dorothy Day we find things that even the solidarity-based anarchist view cannot overlook: be it her de facto leadership role (not only) in the New York CW community or her tendency to obey the Catholic clergy (even if she repeatedly openly opposed them).

At the same time, however, she offended the Catholics in her environment far more often than the anarchists. But here too, the

Other important areas of activity were supporting conscientious objectors – including in World War II.

Dorothy Day was against the war and the USA's entry into the war due to her unshakable pacifism. This issue was controversial within CW and led to some CW activists leaving the movement. CW were also supporters of the civil rights movement from the start. Long before it began, a black and a white worker were holding hands on the front of The Catholic Worker newspaper (later a woman was added).

During the Cold War, it was mainly the CW who protested against the exercises to prepare the USA for a nuclear attack (the so-called Civil Defense campaign). When the sirens blared for training purposes and the population was instructed to hide in subway tunnels and the like, they remained outside with signs and banners as an act of civil disobedience and refused to take part in these “war games”. They were all imprisoned several times for this. The protest movement against the Vietnam War was also influenced by the CW (Tom Cornell is best known here), and Irish CW caused a stir in 2003 when they broke into a US Army air base in protest against the Iraq War and smashed F16 fighter jets with hammers.

Dorothy Day: an anarchist life?

The point that is crucial, despite many unanswered questions and apparent contradictions – which are almost entirely due to her Catholicism – is how Dorothy Day worked, how she lived and what actions resulted from her convictions. Here it becomes clear that it is not unreasonable to derive a type of anarchism from the Bible and that, lived according to these principles, a genuinely anarchist lifestyle can emerge. The only thing that was new and different from classic Christian anarchism was her Catholicism.

But no one can deny Dorothy Day this anarchist lifestyle at least – criticism of religion and Catholicism or not.

Dorothy Day's political socialization was also one with a strong anarchist orientation. She read Kropotkin's writings early on, became a Wobbly – a member of the unionist Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) – and supported the anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti when they were sentenced to death.

Her focus was mostly on labor struggles and antimilitarism. However, she was in contact not only with decidedly anarchist circles, but also with socialists from other currents.

She wrote for various socialist magazines such as The Masses, The Call and The Liberator, was even briefly a member of the Socialist Party of America and the Communist Party USA and had friendly contacts with the communist Mike Gold and the IWW activist and later communist Elisabeth Gurley Flynn.

From these aspects of her political life it is clear that Day's understanding of socialism had strong libertarian influences, but at the same time she was also pluralistic and open to other currents and people who could be found in the spectrum of revolutionary socialism.

Religion and Politics

After religiosity played a certain role for Day in her childhood (her parents were not religious and did not raise her in this sense), was not important in her youth, but was also not something she actively opposed, she gradually found her way back to religion, especially after being imprisoned for her commitment to women's suffrage, although she never voted.

Her conversion to Catholicism was probably due to personal contacts on the one hand, but to a greater extent to the fact that Catholics made up the poorer classes in the USA at that time and that she had moved and lived primarily in such “slums” since her time in the revolutionary socialist movement. Whether as an athe-

ist anarchist or as a libertarian Christian: it was the impoverished working class to which she belonged and with whom she fought.

When it comes to her renewed turn to religion, it is important to note that her activism, her resistance and her commitment to injustice and oppression did not diminish — all of this was coded differently. What changed was the setting and the terminology.

As far as the setting is concerned, she was well aware that her conversion to Catholicism was alienating most of her friends and acquaintances. Even her relationship with the anarchist Forster Batterham, with whom she had a daughter, broke down because of it. Nevertheless, her new-found religious convictions made her take this painful step, although she never lost contact with the anarchist/socialist movement.

Regarding the change in terminology, the things she stood for or against throughout her life remained the same. It was just that with her conversion they were increasingly given different names. When Day spoke of “mercy”, it was identical in content to the “solidarity” she spoke of as Wobbly.

When she spoke of “voluntary poverty”, which is to be understood as a conscious statement against capitalist conditions and as solidarity with the poor and marginalized, it is strongly reminiscent of Paul Goodman’s idea of “dignified poverty”. The CW slogan of a “Revolution of the Heart” also sounds a lot like William Godwin or Kropotkin’s “Reform of Consciousness”.

So you can see that the terminology that Day used may have changed after her conversion to Catholicism, but her motivation and thinking behind it, as well as her concrete actions, hardly changed. This is not to portray her deep religiosity and her fundamental way of life as a mere change in terminology, but it is striking that her field of activist activity hardly changed. This also explains why the CW was always a cooperation partner for the non-religious anarchist/socialist movement.

Day’s attempt to combine her rediscovered religiosity with her social-revolutionary commitment resulted in a magazine and a movement that called itself Catholic Worker.

The Catholic Worker und Houses of Hospitality

In 1933, Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin founded the magazine *The Catholic Worker* and distributed the first issue at the traditional May Day demonstration in Union Square in New York. Maurin originally wanted to call the magazine *The Catholic Radical*, but Day argued that it should be clear that the newspaper was aimed at the struggling and exploited working class, so *Radical* became *Worker* on her initiative.

What began as a newspaper soon became a movement centered around the so-called Houses of Hospitality. In addition to various events and lectures, these houses also provided meals and accommodation for the needy and homeless. Parallel to the Houses of Hospitality in the urban centers, farms were founded in the countryside that temporarily supplied the houses with food, making them more or less self-sufficient. Houses of Hospitality and CW farms still exist today.

Activism

Then as now, CW activism on the street meant creative non-violent resistance and civil disobedience. Supporting strikers and antimilitarism were always the main areas of activity.

As early as the 1930s, demonstrations were held against anti-Semitism and the persecution of Jews in Germany. In doing so, CW activists not only opposed the anti-Semitism that was widely accepted in American society at the time, but also against various anti-Semitic Catholic priests.