John Howard Yoder and anarchism

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A number of years ago when I read George Woodcock's classic history of *Anarchism*, I found the thinking he described quite attractive. I spent some time considering how compatible anarchism would be with my Christian pacifism. I have believed it would be, but never quite found time to pursue the issue in more depth. At some point, though, I was struck with the thought that John Howard Yoder's "politics of Jesus" could perhaps be understood as a version of anarchism.

I have resolved to spend some time pursuing this line of thought in the months to come. I just started reading a massive, well-written, wide-ranging and fascinating history of anarchism, Peter Marshall's *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. I plan to write more about that book as I read through it. This fall, when I teach my "Biblical Theology of Peace and Justice" class (which includes reading Yoder's *Politics* and Walter Wink's *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*), I expect to devote quite a bit of attention to thinking about anarchism in relation to Yoder's and Wink's ways of reading the Bible.

Happily, I encountered a recent article that encourages me to pursue this project. This article (Ted Troxell, "Christian Theology: Postanarchism, Theology, and John Howard Yoder," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 7.1 [2013], 37–59) came to my attention at just the right time. It's already one of my favorite essays on Yoder's thought.

Troxell helps me understand quite a bit about the current terrain in discussions about anarchism, and better yet confirms my sense that bringing Yoder and anarchism together is a good idea.

What is anarchism?

The term "anarchism," similarly to "nonviolence," is a negative term that in its most profound sense speaks of a positive approach to human social life. It's not simply *against* "authority" (*arché*); it is *for* freedom and *for* decentralized ways of organizing social life that enhance human well-being.

Anarchism has an unfair, though not totally unfounded, reputation for being violent, even terrorist. There indeed have been numerous acts of violence in the name of anarchism, perhaps most notably in the United States the 1901 assassination of President William McKinley at the hand of a self-proclaimed anarchist (though one who seemingly had few links with other anarchists).

The great thinkers in the anarchist tradition, however, generally were not people of violence and did not advocate terrorist tactics. Late 19th and early 20th century writers and visionaries such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Michael Bakunin (perhaps the most pro-violence of the lot), Peter Kropotkin, and Emma Goldman had ambivalent feelings about violence, but for all of them, the main concern was imagining how human life might be organized in ways that enhance human freedom and self-determination.

Still, what probably unites classical anarchists as much as anything is a strong antipathy toward the state. There is a sense that the spirit of anarchism is not unfairly described as a spirit of rebellion versus centralized nation states as much as any one commitment. To achieve political life that is genuinely free and un-self-determined, the state must go—root and branch.

However, Troxell suggests that current discussions about anarchism are pushing toward redefining the philosophy in ways that are less state-centric. Two variants he spends significant time on are "postanarchism" and "Christian anarchism." He suggests that attention to Yoder's thought might be useful for both and might help them to find more common cause.

Postanarchism

"Postanarchism" is a term that has arisen in the 21st century to refer to attempts to bring apply postmodern or poststructuralist thought to anarchism. Troxell writes, "this term does not mean 'to be finished with anarchism,' or that anarchism's moment has definitively passed, but instead denotes the introduction of poststructuralist and postmodern critiques into anarchist theory" (38).

One important postanarchist thinker, Todd May, differentiates between what he calls "strategic" and "tactical" thinking. A strategic-thinking-oriented anarchism focuses on a "single problematic" (i.e., the state), while a more tactical-thinking-oriented approach "questions the strategic calculus by which a single site becomes the focus of resistance" (Troxell, 39).

Troxell welcomes this increased flexibility, partly because it allows anarchism better to respond "to neoliberalism, in which the state is no longer the primary political actor" (39). In general, a more tactical approach creates possibilities of heightened creativity in navigating the particular issues facing people seeking a more humane politics in the contemporary world.

Postanarchism, as presented by Troxell, also makes a closer link between Christianity and anarchism more possible. One aspect of this dynamic, the growth of the sense that we are living in a time of "postsecularity"—challenging the "presumption of secularity as the background for anarchist resistance" (40).

Christian anarchism

As a rule, not without reason, mainstream Christianity has been seen by anarchists as part of the problem. However, ever since the rise of Christendom in the early Middle Ages, a few Christians have joined the resistance to the domination system (e.g., "the poverty of the early Franciscans, the uncompromising witness of the Radical Reformation, the labor resistance of the Catholic Worker movement,…not to mention the role of Christian theology in the Civil Rights Movement," [40]).

Troxell suggests it is even possible to talk about "Christian anarchism," though this is anarchism that does not see its goal as overthrowing the state so much as "living out an alternative that prefigures the more just and peaceful world that will be realized in the eschaton, or final deliverance" (41).

A contemporary theologian, Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, has written a book, *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel,* that articulates a vision that "does not call for overthrowing existing systems so much as subverting them, usually in the form of alternative communities (more specifically, seeing the church as a collection of such communities) that embody the values of the world to come" (Troxell, 42–3). The hoped for revolution will lead to social transformation, but through love, patience, and forgiveness not violence and terror.

For Christian anarchism, radical living in the present is made possible by trust in God's guidance of history that will in the end culminate in an authentically anarchist social reality. Troxell presents Christian anarchism more as "a kind of trend or gesture toward an ideal that is sometimes made explicit and other times merely hinted at or left dormant" than "a coherent, self-identifying movement" (41). But it clearly seems like a growing "trend," and Yoder is an important resource for many Christian anarchists.

Yoder's contribution

Yoder never called himself an anarchist. He actually rarely if ever directly engaged anarchist thought, though he was positively disposed toward the Catholic Worker movement with its strong tendencies toward anarchism. Troxell writes, "Yoder theorizes the state differently than classical anarchism insofar as his *critique* of the state does not call for an outright *abolition* of the state. The state apparatus, problematic as it might be, serves a restraining purpose, and to call for its wholesale dissembly would be to foist upon millions of people an anarchism for which they are not prepared" (44; Troxell's emphases).

However, the burden of Troxell's paper is to emphasize the compatibilities between Yoder's thought and the emerging postanarchist perspective. The postanarchists, as mentioned above, also do not make the abolition of the state the be-all and end-all of anarchism. Though postanarchism is not explicitly committed to pacifism in the way Yoder is, Troxell seems to sense that it is not far from such a commitment and engagement with Yoder could help make explicit and self-conscious an affirmation of nonviolence that would be the logical conclusion of postanarchism's sharp critique of violence.

Another insight from Yoder that could help postanarchism is his understanding of power. "Yoder rejected a univocal understanding of power in favor of a more nuanced recognition of powers in the plural, referring to the 'powers and principalities' mentioned in the New Testament." Similarly, postanarchism proposes an understanding of power that sees it arising from "many different sites….There is an interplay among these various sites in the creation of the social world" (Troxell, 45, quoting Todd May). Yoder himself wrote, "the notion that 'power' is univocal and unilinear is one of the mythical dimensions of modernity" (from *For the Nations*, quoted by Troxell, 45).

At the heart of Yoder's thought is a sense that the focus of social action should be on constructing humane spaces for creativity and peaceable living more than on directly overthrowing the existing order. Troxell summarizes: "Yoder offers what we might call a *structural indifference* to the state: it is not that the state is unimportant or inconsequential on a practical level, but that neither the existence of the state nor the particular shape it takes is the primary locus of the community's political considerations" (47, Troxell's emphasis). These thoughts closely parallel what Troxell calls postanarchism's "rejection of vanguardist politics" (47). "For both Yoder and May, because there is no central locus of power of which humans might gain control, there is no group of humans who can claim to occupy it legitimately" (48). Thus, one implication of this "structural indifference to the state" is to resist the idea of creating a vanguard that can overthrow the state and take its place. A commitment to decentralized power must go all the way down.

When the focus is on constructing decentralized spaces to be humane more than concentrated efforts at overthrowing the state, the emphasis will be on the practices that sustain that humaneness—another point of close connection between Yoder's thought and postanarchism. Yoder's important book, Body Politics, is in essence a meditation on these kinds of practices as the true sacraments of Christian communities. Postanarchists, of course, don't use language such as "sacraments," but thinkers such as Todd May write about "micropolitics" and David Graeber about "an ethics of practice" (48).

A central practice is that of patient listening to various points of view. This is a central emphasis of Yoder. "Patient listening even to one's adversary is part of the process of seeking knowledge" (Troxell, 49, paraphrasing Body Politics). David Graeber's thought is quite similar: "If you have

the power to hit people over the head whenever you want, you don't have to trouble yourself too much figuring out what they think is going on, and therefore generally speaking, you don't" (quoted in Troxell, 49).

Troxell perceptively discusses how Yoder's politics follow from his convictions about God and Jesus. He has a metaphysical grounding not available to postanarchists (52). However, because of Yoder's theology of creation, he would not be surprised to see postanarchism's political insights that parallel the "politics of Jesus."

One crucial insight in Yoder's politics is how he grounds his emphasis on stable, even transcendent, values in the nonviolent witness of Jesus. This is one way (perhaps even the only way?) to affirm values in a way that is not dominating and coercive. Such an approach emphasizes radical patience. "Patience implies trust. To engage in the consensus process is an act of trust. To forgo hegemonic and counterhegemonic strategies of change is an act of trust. To renounce violence at any level is an act of trust—to renounce it at every level even more so" (54).

Acknowledging the centrality of trust leads to the question of the object of the trust. Troxell suggests, "Yoder has the language of Christian theology to draw upon in naming this trust. For him, it was a matter of faith in God, of 'waiting on the Lord,' of believing there to be a deeper logic to existence, in which patient nonviolence might make sense" (54).

The limits of a relatively short journal article do not allow Troxell to do much more than simply name this place for theology. As the conversation of Yoder's kind of politics with postanarchism continues, this issue of the object of trust will be of crucial importance. I actually think this is where we may bump up against the limits of Yoderian thought, because (in my view, at least) Yoder (and most of his acolytes) can seem a bit trite when they talk about God. I think Yoder's fellow Mennonite pacifist theologian Gordon Kaufman has a crucial contribution to make here.

More from Yoder's thought

I hope I have said enough in this summary of Troxell's extraordinary essay to give a sense of why I am so excited by it. He helps bring together two extremely important resources for Christian social ethics—the traditions of Christian pacifism and of anarchism—and in doing so shows even more the on-going relevance of John Howard Yoder's thought.

The direction I have been hoping to take (and Troxell's essay only heightens my motivation to do this) is to draw on Yoder's overall reading of biblical politics (John Nugent's recent book, *The Politics of Yahweh : John Howard Yoder, the Old Testament, and the People of God*, is a most helpful resource for getting a coherent sense of how Yoder read the Old Testament) to begin to construct a biblical politics in conversation with anarchism.

Yoder suggests a line of continuity from the formation of the people of God around the liberating work of Yahweh (with the prophetic word and not human power politics at the center) through the failure of the geographically-bounded kingdom option through the continuation of peoplehood based on Torah and not the sword culminating in Jesus as king, reinforcing a politics of servanthood. Many of the anarchist thinkers and practitioners (maybe most especially Peter Kropotkin) have sought a similar kind of politics.

My concern is not so much with converting anarchists to Christianity or to convert Christians to anarchists. I don't even know yet if I want to call myself a full-fledged anarchist. More so, I want

to work at a way of reading the Bible that would challenge Christians to embody a radical politics. And if doing so would make biblical and theological resources more available to anarchists and other activists, so much the better.

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