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In Defense of Catholic Worker Anarchism

Tom Cornell

May 2010

Ammon Hennacy did the Catholic Worker a lot of good. He got us out on the street selling the paper and into court rooms and jail cells for nonviolent direct action protesting war and war taxes and Civil Defense. We call ourselves Catholic anarchists largely because of him, but we seldom examine what that means.

Ammon refused to register for the World War I draft and served over two years, eight months of it in solitary confinement at Atlanta federal prison. In 1940 he was still of an age obliged to register for the World War II draft. Again he refused. But this time Selective Service ignored him. From then on he refused to pay federal income taxes and took day-labor as a farm-worker in Arizona so that, if the feds wanted to garnishee his wages, they'd have to send a "revenooer" out every day at sundown to confiscate his pay envelope. It wasn't worth it. Ammon was arrested over fifty times for nonviolent civil disobedience, but more important, he took personal responsibility in little things. If a trash barrel was overturned onto the street, he would go out of his way to right things. That was essential to his idea of anarchism.

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Anarchism has been controversial within the Catholic Worker movement at least since the Pacifist Weekend of 1954, when Robert Ludlow, whom Dorothy Day had dubbed the Catholic Worker's chief theoretician, renounced anarchism, or better, the Catholic Worker's appropriation of the term and whatever Bob meant by it (v. his "Re-evaluation" in the June 1955 CW). Many secular anarchists agree with Ludlow and hold that "Catholic" and "anarchist" are mutually exclusive terms. Ammon provocatively called his book *The Autobiography of a Catholic Anarchist*. In a second edition, Ammon added a chapter on why he left the Catholic Church and changed the title to *The Book of Ammon*. (Ammon was reconciled to the Church a few days before his death. His funeral was held at the Catholic Church of St. Joan of Arc in Salt Lake City, Utah.)

What kind of anarchism can we claim? An etymological definition (an- meaning no- and arche meaning rule) is useless if it fails to recognize a current in the wider socialist movement, called by its detractors anarchism. No anarchist of sound mind holds either that government does not exist or ought not to exist, etymology notwithstanding. All socialists want government to promote the general welfare rather than the enrichment of the few at the expense of the many, "people before profits."

As I see it, anarchists would want more government if that means courts defending the right of workers to organize, the Department of Agriculture helping to initiate independent producer and consumer cooperatives instead of supporting vertical integration of farms into ever bigger and more powerful conglomerates. Government could favor open-pollinated seed sharing instead of forcing farmers around the world to buy new patented hybrid seed for each planting to enrich Monsanto. Government could facilitate worker buy-outs of small industries with no-interest loans. The Postal Service could subsidize journals of opinion as it once did in order to disseminate alternative ideas and enrich democratic de-

There is no more revolutionary manifesto than the Sermon on the Mount.

Catholic Workers do not, by and large, engage in conventional politics. It is too late for that. "What matters is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict" (Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*). Although he insists that he is not an anarchist, MacIntyre paints the picture as we see it.

In order not to be conformed to this age, not to be co-opted by an effete state socialism or, even worse, by decadent bourgeois liberalism, to continue ever to be transformed in the renewal of our understanding, to discern what is truly good and pleasing and perfect, the will of God, Catholic Workers should nurture the gifts our founders left us, continue to identify as anarchists, and struggle always to understand just what that means. ☒

although permitted by civil legislation, are contrary to the Law of God. Such cooperation in fact can never be justified, not by invoking respect for the freedom of others nor by appealing to the fact that it is foreseen and required by civil law. No one can escape the moral responsibility for actions taken, and all will be judged by God himself based on this responsibility (#399).” Catholics understand this in the matter of abortion. Once the principle is established, it can be applied to war and unjust social and political structures as well. It’s revolutionary!

Decisions for civil disobedience must be made in good conscience under spiritual guidance, after careful consideration of the facts of the matter and the context and the consequences and the principles involved. A good conscience must be a right conscience as well, based on a correct judgment of the facts and informed by the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. Won’t that lead to chaos? When the time draws near that nonviolent civil disobedience threatens the common good, then we will reconsider the matter. But that is not the problem today. Quite the opposite! The problem today is obedience. The Nazi Army was overwhelmingly Christian, Roman Catholic, Lutheran, over 90 percent. If there wasn’t a pastoral failure involved in that, then there is no such thing and we pastors and preachers and catechists and religious teachers are irrelevant. It’s all “pie in the sky.” If the Kingdom of God is not here and now it will never be then and there.

Dorothy Day believed that a revolutionary force already set in motion would at last sweep the world. The last century saw many a counterfeit. If there is to be a revolution, it will be, as Ammon Hennacy called it, the one man or one woman revolution, or as Dorothy put it, “the revolution of the heart,” one by one. If there is to be “a new social order in which it is easier to be good,” it will be built on the means that Peter Maurin envisioned, “a philosophy so old it looks like new, the gentle personalism of traditional Christianity.”

bate, and so that the means of communication might not fall into the hands of a few.

But conversely, anarchists would want much less government if that means the State Department, and the so-called Defense and Justice Departments and counter-revolution, the overthrow of socialist initiatives wherever they may be and the installation of right-wing dictators in client states. Anarchists want much less, no government if that means racist prisons and war, but more anti-trust legislation and enforcement, trust-busting, not union-busting, more environmental protection, more Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and immediate access to federal courts for every labor organizer punished for organizing. But anarchists will hold even benign organs of government to a most strict accounting, since “power tends to corrupt,” and they will view the state in practice more as a guarantor of privilege than as an organ of its diffusion.

The late Howard Zinn described his social philosophy as “democratic socialism, without passports or visas or jails.” Noam Chomsky calls himself an anarchist, by which he means a libertarian socialist, as did Paul Goodman, Emma Goldman and in her pre-Stalinist days, Elizabeth Gurley Flynn. When Dorothy Day defended the Cuban revolution she did not imagine that Fidel Castro planned to do away with government. Anarchism has to be understood within the broader socialist tradition. Neo-conservatives want to starve the government to death so as to free rapacious corporate interests from any restraint. That is not our kind of anarchism.

Anarchist thinkers distinguish between society, government and the state. National sovereignty entails the ability of the state to protect its interests or to project its might with ultimate force. But the whole of humankind will live as long as it lives under the threat of weapons of mass destruction. Weapons of mass destruction can not be allowed to remain in the hands of nation states without a high probability that they will eventually be used.

That is morally inadmissible, absolutely. If the primary purpose of the state is to protect its people and the modern nation state is the primary threat to the survival of all peoples, what can be said of its legitimacy?

Gordon Zahn intended in his retirement years to address the issue of nationalism as a threat to human survival. He wasn't granted the time. Another framework has to come into play under the overarching principles of the unity of the human family, the need to defend the innocent, the integrity of cultures and the sovereignty of God in a globalization of solidarity, not a globalization of exploitation. How will anarchists contribute to that project?

Instead of a political program or ideology, anarchists offer a set of attitudes and preferences: the fewer rules and regulations, the better. "All the law necessary, and no more than is necessary," and then we argue over "necessary." We favor spontaneity over predictability, initiative and invention over tried-and-true patterns and personal responsibility over delegation. Authority is to be won by good work and exercised only as long as it is recognized by equals. Anarchists look to horizontal organization before vertical structure, though not denying the need for that too. Catholic anarchists temper individualism with a mind toward community and the common good. Many vote and even hold local public office. But the preferred *modus operandi* is direct action and the formation of small, intimate communities.

Government can advance the right of peoples to organize for the redress of grievances and for the advancement of their own interests. Since the rich and powerful are already well organized, law and government should make a "preferential option" to extend the same rights to the poor and the marginalized in order to advance justice, promote the general welfare and civil harmony. In the modern state they seldom do. Anarchists are likely to perceive this anomaly, and the deception the powerful employ to justify the wars that maintain their power and privilege.

Catholic anarchists gratefully accept the teaching authority of the Church. How to make our position understandable and attractive to others, especially our fellow Catholics, should be part of our clarification of thought. I have come to conclude that Catholic Worker radicalism is not eccentric at all, but comes from the very heart of the Church. Democratic, libertarian socialism or anarchism best harmonizes the principles of Catholic social teaching: the supreme goods of justice and peace; the dignity of the human person with inherent rights from conception to natural death; universal solidarity with a preferential option for the poor and the young; the defense of the innocent; the universal destination of goods; the right to private property; the priority of labor over capital; subsidiarity and the universal common good, all in the tradition of the virtues.

Almost all Americans have been conditioned by their schooling and the media to believe that ours is a democratic republic and not what it is in fact, an oligarchic plutocracy on its way to fascism. They have been programmed to be compulsive consumers, willing cannon-fodder and compliant accomplices in their own exploitation. Religion should sharpen, not dull moral judgment. If fascism ever comes to this country it will undoubtedly be wrapped in the flag and brandishing the Cross. To reach our fellow Catholics we should go to the Magisterium.

Christians are obliged to obey duly constituted authority justly exercised (Rom 13, 1-2). We must also ask what constitutes legitimate authority and how justly is it exercised. According to the Compendium of the Social Teachings of the Catholic Church, "Citizens are not obligated in conscience to follow the prescriptions of civil authorities if their precepts are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or to the teachings of the Gospel (#820). Unjust laws pose dramatic problems of conscience for morally upright people: when they are called to cooperate in morally evil acts they must refuse.... It is a grave duty of conscience not to cooperate, not even formally, in practices which,