

# **Was Jesus an anarchist?**

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How should the person of faith relate to the institutions of the state — a state that sometimes engages in physical force, violence and war? Should Christians accept that the state, even a warring state, enjoys divine approval, or demonstrate that their citizenship is elsewhere by resisting those actions of the state that are inconsistent with the peaceable kingdom of God? These are big questions that go to the heart of the discipline of political theology, and a new book considers a radical approach to that believer-state relationship. In *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel*, Alexandre Christoyannopoulos argues that Christian anarchism is both a unique political theology and a unique political theory. In this interview for Will & Testament, I asked him to explain why he believes Christian anarchism represents a form of faithful Christian discipleship.

## **What is Christian anarchism?**

The basic idea behind Christian anarchism is that when it comes to politics, “anarchism” is what follows (or is supposed to follow) from “Christianity”. “Anarchism” here can mean, for example, a denunciation of the state (because through it we are violent, we commit idolatry, and so on), the envisioning of a stateless society, and/or the enacting of an inclusive, bottom-up kind of community life. And “Christianity” can be understood, for example, in the very rationalistic way Leo Tolstoy interprets it, through the Catholic framework Dorothy Day approaches it, or through the various Protestant eyes of people like Jacques Ellul, Vernard Eller, Dave Andrews or Michael Elliott. There can therefore be a lot of ways “Christianity” is interpreted, and equally there are many facets to this “anarchism”. But one way or the other, Christian anarchism holds the view that, properly understood, what Jesus calls us to in the political sphere is some form of anarchism.

## **Have there been examples of Christian anarchist political action in the past ten years since 9/11?**

Yes, many — as any research on Christian anarchist websites (such as this, this, this, or this) will confirm. Christian anarchists have conducted public “liturgies”, taken part in direct action and joined broader coalitions to denounce the many angles of “War on Terror”, from Afghanistan and Iraq to domestic restrictions on civil liberties. So, for example: they have “turned into ploughshares” US military warplanes passing through Shannon airport; poured blood outside the DSEi Arms Fair; blockaded Northwood and Faslane; read names of war victims outside Downing Street; “exorcised” the MoD; and campaigned in support of wiki-whistleblower Bradley Manning. But they’ve been just as engaged in denouncing the origins of the financial crisis and the consequences of “our” government’s reactions to it; the worsening global environmental catastrophe; the continuing tragedy which sees human beings die in the thousands to seek a better life at the heart of the empire only to be beaten back, imprisoned and sometimes killed while being deported; and of course the globalised political economy which relentlessly produces all this and seems so difficult to truly reform. All this, they have done at huge personal

costs — with many arrested and tried, sometimes imprisoned and fined, while the mainstream media are busy pumping adverts and looking elsewhere.

## **Was Jesus an anarchist?**

I think a good case can be made that yes, in many ways, he was. To quote Tolstoy: “Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State. It was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified.” There are many New Testament passages that would suggest this, and I can only mention the main ones here (I’ve tried to cover all those commented on by Christian anarchist writers in my book). The most famous must be the Sermon on the Mount, but much of its content is repeated in the many passages in which Jesus, James, Peter or Paul talk of forgiveness, of loving our enemies and of not judging one another — the state does not do that (or rather we don’t do that through it), and if we did it then the state would anyway become largely redundant. There is also the third temptation in the desert, a pretty clear condemnation of state idolatry. Or the Temple Cleansing, where Jesus’ direct action clearly implies a denunciation of the concentration and abuses of religious, political and economic power (and most Christian anarchists insist the action was nonviolent, by the way). Then there are all the bitter criticisms of the Pharisees as hypocrites in their application of divine law, criticisms that don’t seem that inapplicable to some church authorities today. Jesus’ arrest and trial also exemplify his attitude with respect to political authorities, and his crucifixion embodies both his condemnation of state violence and his forgiving alternative to overcome it. Then there is the Book of Acts, the many Epistles, and of course the Apocalypse — all of which one can find convincing Christian anarchist interpretations on. In other words, according to quite a few passages in the New Testament, Jesus’ teaching and example tend towards anarchism broadly defined.

## **Doesn’t the New Testament call on believers to respect civil authorities and to honour secular governments as those whom God has placed in authority?**

The two passages that are most frequently brought up as “clear evidence” of this, against Christian anarchist interpretations, are Romans 13 and “render unto Caesar.” Neither can be covered in enough depth here. But to hint at the explanation of these offered by Christian anarchists, regarding the former, Paul (who didn’t, by the way, always strictly obey the authorities of his day) is really just offering his interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, of Jesus’ call to forgive and love even the worst of enemies — just as he did by submitting to the Cross. Romans 13 does not legitimise authorities but calls to submit to them as a way of turning the other cheek, to overcome their evil not through violent resistance but with an exemplary attitude that seeks to patiently understand and forgive. As to “render unto Caesar”, the coins are Caesar’s to claim back, but beyond that, little else “belongs to Caesar.” What is not Caesar’s but God’s, however, includes life and indeed pretty much anything but coins and public monuments. Hence Jesus here calls us to clearly distinguish what really matters a lot from the fickle things that are technically Caesar’s. Again, this is just a far too brief summary of what can be said about these passages, but I’m just giving you the pointers to the Christian anarchist interpretation.

## **Are Christian anarchists always pacifists?**

By and large, yes. In many cases their anarchism derives precisely from their uncompromising pacifism. They are certainly very critical of war and other forms of political violence. But that doesn't mean that they advocate shrinking away and letting violence prevail unopposed. Christian anarchists campaign to creatively unmask and denounce such violence, and they often spend much effort trying to alleviate the suffering that ensues from political violence. For example, they take part in "turning swords into ploughshares" actions, they organise vigils for those killed at war, they provide food and shelter to refugees, and so on. In a way, they "try to build a new (pacifist) society within the shell of the old". So they are pacifists, yes, but it's perhaps important to stress that this makes them no less "active" and courageous than non-pacifists in campaigning against injustice or evil.

## **If there is a Christian anarchist critique of the state, is there also a Christian anarchist critique of the church?**

Yes — a sometimes very bitter one at that. For a start, they are critical of the church's tendency to reassure Christians that what Jesus clearly asks of his followers is actually unrealistic and not really meant for us here and now, but only for the hereafter (as if there would be any point voicing such demands if that was the case!). For Christian anarchists, it's very disappointing that Jesus' radical political demands have been betrayed by almost all official churches and their theologians as they became more established and institutionalised. This was often a price for political protection or at least an end to their persecution, but then Jesus warned his followers should expect such persecution. So yes, if only for its betrayal of Jesus' radical demands, Christian anarchists have always been critical of the church. But for many the critique doesn't stop there. The more anticlerical amongst them, such as Tolstoy, have accused the church of stupefying its flock with obscure rituals and beliefs which deaden human reason and divert attention away from the Sermon on the Mount. Many have explicitly denounced some of the horrors perpetrated by the church over the centuries, either directly as with the Crusades, or indirectly by claiming that "God is with us" in the latest necessary war to combat some dehumanised evil. All are critical of the church's long romance with the state. And many point out that the "church" was meant to be a intentional community (willingly joined through baptism and only upon repentance) of people who chose to take up their cross and follow Jesus, a community bound to be as threatening to contemporary authorities as Jesus was, a radically-different community of love, care and justice which would enlighten an otherwise very dark world. That cannot unfortunately be said of that many churches. Radical activists and offshoots have arisen over the centuries (think of St Francis, the Diggers, the Quakers, the Anabaptists and Mennonites, or more recently Liberation Theology), but unless they become a majority, the Christian church will remain susceptible to the sort of criticisms aired by Christian anarchists.

## **Would you describe yourself as a Christian Anarchist?**

I don't deserve the honour! Christian anarchists have often made huge personal sacrifices by devoting their lives to exemplifying Jesus' Christian anarchism, risking arrests and persecution,

living in poverty and doing their best to desist from contributing to the global political and economic machine which perpetuates institutional violence, economic exploitation and gluttonous consumerism. They are inspiring by their commitment to a Christian anarchist way of responding to injustice, and in my view many of them can rightly be compared to Gandhi (whose non-violence owes a lot, by his own admission, to his reading of Tolstoy's main Christian anarchist book). I can't claim to be doing anything as heroic as that! I see my contribution as pointing to and providing the space for academic discussions and studies of Christian anarchism, and I'm obviously rather sympathetic to Christian anarchism. But Christian anarchism is as much a way of life as a belief, and I don't think I deserve the honour which, in my view, the label Christian anarchist amounts to.

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