

# Christianity and Anarchism

Mark Butler & Graham Philpott  
March 2014

All too often Jesus and Christianity have been (ab)used to justify and defend the powers and principalities of the world. Though common, it is clearly blasphemous. Few historically 'great' figures are more clearly and explicitly against hierarchy, and against the power of some over others, than Jesus. And in Jesus' case, this unmistakable stance is not just a future ideal towards which we are urged to progress – it's an axiomatic ethical principle to be enacted now, practically and in deliberate, defiant refusal of the 'ways of the World'. This anti-authoritarian ethos and practice of the early 'Jesus movement' was its distinguishing mark. Not only in its political manifestos – perhaps most succinctly captured in the ethical values and programme of the Sermon on the Mount – but also in the lived relations of radical egalitarianism of the disciples and early Christian communities. We argue that the same marks were central characteristics of the reclamation of faithful Christian praxis in the 'radical reformation' that produced many of the currents within the anabaptist tradition.

Given these characteristics, it should not be surprising that there is a long and significant tradition and literature<sup>1</sup> that connects these truths with an exploration of the relation between Christianity and anarchism. (Equally unsurprising is the sad truth of the suppression of those traditions.) Although, in the mainstream, anarchism is typically vilified as essentially crazed and violent, it is of course in reality a perfectly serious philosophical and political project of human freedom and liberation. Among its defining features are precisely a commitment to radical egalitarianism between all people; a deep distrust of hierarchy and state power over people; and a political practice that reflects those values now in the struggle for achieving them more widely throughout society. The latter is generally called a 'prefigurative politics' and collapses the disastrous separation of means from ends.

So it's clear there are important parallels and resonances between the two systems of thought at the level of their respective central ideas and values. Jaques Ellul ("*Anarchism and Christianity*", **Katallagete**, 1980) concludes that

the sole political Christian position conforms to Revelation: the negation of power, the total, radical refusal to accept its existence, and the fundamental contesting of whatever form it takes. And I do not say this because of an orientation towards a kind of Spiritualism, or an ignorance of politics, an a-politicism. Certainly not! On the contrary. As a Christian one must participate in the world of politics and of action. But one must do so to reject it, to confront it with the conscientious and well-founded refusal that alone can put into question, or even prevent, the unchecked growth of power. Thus Christians cannot help but be only on the side of anarchists.

---

1 A tradition and literature we do not pretend to represent or summarise in this very brief piece!

But our own little contribution to the present discussion comes from a rather more practical base – the ongoing cycles of action and reflection that characterise the work of the Church Land Programme (CLP), an organisation that we are both connected with. We propose to share a couple of excerpts from CLP's own writing about that work, to indicate how we have come to respect and draw on those ways of thinking that appear common to faithful Christianity and principled anarchism (although we do not think of ourselves as 'anarchists'). In particular, how our learning from the struggles of organised poor people in South Africa, continuing through the “post-apartheid” period, forces a critical re-evaluation of state politics.

The first time this question was raised explicitly in CLP's writings was a paper we released back in 2007 called: ***Learning to Walk – NGO Practice and the Possibility of Freedom***. Here we wrote that:

“Critical reflection and ... [a]nalysis of what is happening in our context [is important and] made it necessary to re-think some of our fundamental assumptions about the relation between freedom, the state and political power. For many of us, our tendency had been to assume that the interests of justice and freedom were more or less compatible with the new democratic state. But the reality of post-apartheid South Africa raised a more generalised question as to whether state power *as such* – and here we include all the apparatus that goes along with it (like representative democracy, political parties, etc) – might not invariably be an oppressive and alienating force over people. This was a new question for us and the debates it opened up are far from closed or concluded. It has been very useful and interesting to see that this question has also emerged within movements in different parts of the world, and the struggle of the Zapatistas in Chiapas, Mexico, has been especially relevant and helpful to CLP. John Holloway is a writer who has been very influenced by, and interested in, the Zapatistas. In an interview during 2006, he said:

Although no one talks much about the Revolution these days, everyone knows we need one. But what will we do with this revolution? Take state power again? ... Substituting one state power for another just repeats the same problems over and over again and eventually exhausts the revolution. This is the old way of thinking about revolution and it doesn't work anymore. We have to find a new way. There is no alternative.”

Certainly in the best-rehearsed narratives of the anti-apartheid struggle, and of the place of Christianity in that struggle, traditions of liberation theology and black theology dominate over other, less state-oriented, radical theological traditions of political activism, even though the influence and contribution of the latter arguably far outweighed their numerical representation in those struggles.

In an interview with Dr. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, a leading academic commentator and writer on Christian anarchism, he responded to the question:

“What are some of the main similarities and differences between Christian Anarchism and Liberation Theology? Which do you feel is better supported by scriptures in the New Testament?” as follows:

“The main difference is in the means of change. Liberation theology won’t shy away from employing the state apparatus to improve things. Christian anarchism warns against that. ... You won’t be surprised if I tell you that I feel Christian anarchism is the better supported perspective by New Testament scriptures. That said, the common ground (as with the secular variants) is considerable, and over-emphasising the differences encourages a sectarianism that may do more harm than good. Liberation theology has also produced many (more?) inspiring examples too, for that matter. But Christian anarchism’s denunciation of the state is too scathing to allow a compromise with it. To rephrase the sentence Dorothy Day borrowed from the Wobblies, the new society must be created within the shell of the old, not with it. That is, the new society must supplant the state and what we do to ourselves through it, something which can’t be done by finding yet new reasons to perpetuate it. Otherwise, to borrow this time from Yoder, we’re just changing the palace guards.”<sup>2</sup>

Recently (March 2014), CLP shared some reading materials with friends commenting that:

“The state- and corporate- media in South Africa won’t let us forget that 2014 marks the twentieth anniversary of representative democracy. But the thinking of people’s organisations, and the conditions against which they rebel and organise, remind us just what an utterly disappointing and hollow that project of state democracy actually is. For those who respect and hear the Truth of properly autonomous grassroots thought and action, it is patently obvious that the state can no longer be seriously imagined as a vehicle for emancipatory politics. Furthermore, making the terrain of state politics the primary concern or target of popular protest and power, tends inevitably to distort and finally defeat its original emancipatory impulse. ...

“Around the world left wing movements have often taken state power and then run the state in ways that are similar in some ways to the regimes that they had defeated. In South Africa we know the truth of this bitter reality all too well. ... John Holloway’s response to this problem is based on the intellectual work done in the Zapatista movement where, he says, revolutionaries had to learn to stop telling people what to do and to learn to listen. He explains that the Zapatistas concluded that the point was not to capture the power of the oppressors in the same structures set up by oppression, but rather to share power throughout society. This requires the oppressed to build their own power via their own self-organisation. ... It is the rejection both of revolutionary vanguardism and of state-oriented reformism, the rejection of the party as an organisational form and of the pursuit of power as an aim.”

In a short paper we released during 2013 (***What CLP Believes***<sup>3</sup>), CLP collectively clarified our own understanding of some key concepts that are relevant to the current discussion – inter alia, politics; civil society; the state; and democracy; as follows:

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://themormonworker.net/past-issues/mw-issue-10/an-introduction-to-christian-anarchism/>

<sup>3</sup> What follows are simply a few selections. The full document can be accessed at:  
<http://www.churchland.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/what-clp-believes-final.pdf>

## **Politics**

There's a fundamental split between:

- living politics and a dead politics;
- emancipatory politics and state politics;
- liberatory politics and party politics.

Ranciere reserves the name 'politics' for only the emancipatory trajectory and calls the rest "the police". For him, politics is the clash of the logic of egalitarianism with the logic of the police. For Badiou, emancipatory politics is always a rupture with what is – it is the void of the situation.

S'bu Zikode (of Abahlali baseMjondolo, the South African shack dweller movement) defined politics as the movement out of the places where oppression has assigned us. Whereas the dead politics of state and the parties is always the instruction to go back to your place, emancipatory politics is a politics from below.

It is clear that what we name as 'politics' is not always how others tend to use the term – it is often used exactly to describe the (non)politics of the state. In 2010 (*Finding our voice in the world* – see: <http://www.churchland.org.za/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/Finding-our-voice-in-the-world.pdf>) CLP clarified:

There is an oft-repeated English saying that 'politics is the art of the possible'<sup>4</sup>. But CLP increasingly reserves the name 'politics' for those properly emancipatory moments - or ruptures - where the people establish their human subjectivity in the wider society, and throw off the oppression of being objects of history and domination. Under these conditions, politics is precisely the refusal to accept that the world-as-it-is determines what could be. The world-as-it-is is structured by an underlying architecture of institutions and ideas that seem to work together to uphold the state of things in the interests of those who benefit from it.

## **Civil society**

Civil society is part of the order of how things are in the world. In this way, it is part of the state, and operates on the terrain of the politics of the state. Civil society is important for state politics in allocating people to their place in the state system as 'beneficiaries', 'stakeholders' and 'interest groups'.

Civil society sees itself (and is seen by many other elites) as important bearers of knowledge, of skills, of resources, of the power to access and represent "the community", or "the poor", or "the people", and so on. Civil society tends to think for..., and to speak for... . It often assumes it has the solutions, processes, strategies, and theories – and that its role is to mediate these to 'beneficiaries'.

We affirm leading radical South African thinker and academic, Michael Neocosmos' clarification that civil society is not really about organizational form – it is more a domain of state politics where citizenship, rights and rule of the law are assumed. Michael clarifies that "civil society" is better

---

<sup>4</sup> Originally attributed to Otto von Bismarck, German aristocrat, Prussian Prime Minister(1862 -1890), and First Chancellor of Germany (1871 – 1890).

understood as a domain of state politics (esp. of liberal representative democracy) with characteristic ways of thinking and relating between people and the state, and not simply as a list of organised interest groups. A central insight is Neocosmos' contention that "the majority of people do not relate to the state within a domain of civil society and rights at all, but within what I term 'uncivil society' where the core of politics is founded on patronage not on rights".

## **State**

We noted already that civil society is part of the state, so the term 'state' means more than the government of the day – but certainly includes that. It is all the machinery that maintains and restores order; that allocates people to their places and keeps them there; that ensures stability of the status quo for the benefit of the powerful and rich elites; that maintains a 'balance' between interest groups so that the system itself carries on; and that carries the guns in the last analysis.

In important ways the state is mostly about organising the relationship of the people to the dominant order, so that no fundamental rupture (i.e., politics) takes place.

Sometimes we in CLP have used the idea of the state to indicate simply 'the state of things as they are' – what the New Testament might call "the world". In this way, the state is the opposite of (emancipatory) politics – it is that against which we rebel.

## **Democracy**

It is obvious that majority rule in a state system of representative democracy is nowhere near sufficient – even though this is a common meaning of the word "democracy". For us democracy is more the principled form of political practice deployed by people themselves. Its essential principle is that everybody counts, really – and its practice is centred on the truth that everybody thinks.

The state, and those (like in civil society) who think like the state, insists that democracy means they should give leadership to the masses – in effect that the masses give away their political power in order to be represented. This is the basis of representative 'democracy'. (Again it is worth noting that this means we are back at the opposite of an emancipatory politics because, once you are "represented", you can and must return to your place!) But a real democracy comes from a living politics when people are not represented but present themselves; when the real issues and struggles of the life of the people are not sorted out by experts, other than the people themselves; when making history and the exercise of power is not given away but remain in the minds and hands of the people.

Clearly a real democracy is a 'bottom-up' politics. But that does not guarantee that anti-democratic tendencies are impossible at the grassroots. A radically-democratic and principled praxis must always be maintained through open assemblies and the possibility of rupture from below. We know that even the most militant rupture can degenerate into structures and practices of power over people and lose its real democratic heart. Even in social movements, when 'democracy' is thought of as putting people into structures to represent the masses, then even if the process of electing appears 'democratic' it is sliding into the representative kind of democracy and easily allows leaders to trample on people and on democracy proper. So, here too, it is not organizational form that is decisive, but political principle – the axiom that everyone matters."

## ***An Apocalyptic Style***

In our reflection on our praxis, we find resonance with an apocalyptic theology and politics as proposed by Yoder, affirming that “the crucified Jesus is a more adequate key to understanding what God is about in the real world of empires and armies and markets than is the ruler in Rome”<sup>5</sup>. With an apocalyptic politics, “history continues not because of what kings and presidents might do but because ravens keep alive a prophet starving in the desert, and because even as kings and presidents count their people and take their polls and plan the future, the word of God comes into the wilderness. ... Ravens and peasants have more to do with the movement of history than all the best laid plans of kings. To adopt an apocalyptic style is to ... turn our attention away from the power of kings and toward the power of ravens and peasant prophets in the wilderness.”<sup>6</sup>

As Ellul (1980) concludes:

“when face to face with the evil which is in us ... there are only two options. Either one organizes a repressive system which puts everyone in place, which establishes patterns and norms of behavior, which punishes anyone who oversteps the boundary of the small amount of freedom doled out. (That is, the justification for the power of the State.) Or, one works to transform humanity - the Christian would say conversion – in such a way that renders us able to live with others and serve others as an expression of freedom. That is the expression of Christian love, of the love of God for us manifested in Jesus Christ.”

---

5 J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, pg. 246.

6 D. Toole, *Waiting for Godot in Sarajevo*, pg. 207.