

Restoring Anarcho-Christian Activism: From Nietzsche's Affirmation to Benjamin's Violence

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This chapter approaches the issue of activism through the prism of the pacifism/violence debate within Christian anarchist circles. Based on two philosophical critiques – Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christianity and Walter Benjamin's critique of violence – I challenge the main anarcho-Christian theses that favour a pacifist/passive model of action, providing an alternative context for the interpretation of the relevant biblical passages and, ultimately, offering a restored version of anarcho-Christian activism, beyond dogmatic pacifism and fetishistic violence. The first critique looks at those Christian features that have turned Christianity into self-negation, and promotes an affirmative life stance. The second critique presents a qualitative approach to violence, distinguishing between two types – mythical and divine – out of which the latter revises the role of violence in Christian anarchist practices. Resistance to evil and secular authority can now acquire a new meaning, affirmative and active instead of passive and resentful.

The seeming paradox posed by the term “Christian anarchism” is due to the historical conflict between anarchist and Christian thought and practice that emerged at the end of the eighteenth century. This is the epoch when anarchism gradually builds a more coherent philosophy, obtaining an essential identity in the middle of the next century through the works of the classical anarchists. Christianity, on the other hand, not only has long overcome the fierce persecution by the Roman Empire by the nineteenth century, but also stands in both East and West as the prevailing religion,

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whose official leaders either openly practice political authority (in western Europe through the Catholic Church) or join hands with it (in eastern Europe through the Orthodox Church).

This chapter treats anarchism not as an ideology but rather as an open-ended set of ideas and practices which primarily promote antiauthority, solidarity and freedom. In turn, Christianity is not seen as a closed, dogmatic religion but as the way of life exemplified by Jesus, based on love, brotherhood and life-affirmation. No matter how general and vague the above “definitions” may seem, I intend to demonstrate more clearly the way I approach both in the main part of my essay where the conjunction between anarchism and Christianity takes place in the face of anarcho-Christian activism.

Anarchism, taking many of its basic principles from the Enlightenment, seemed to oppose any metaphysical perception of reality and, due to its antiauthoritarian nature, any form of power that attempts to manipulate, exploit and enslave the individual. Prominent anarchist thinkers like Bakunin, Kropotkin, Stirner, and Goldman, challenged the role religion played, particularly the Christian church, in mollifying popular displeasure and excusing poverty and exploitation by regarding kings and emperors as the fulfilment of the divine will. At the same time, they saw religion discouraging revolutionary action, instead waiting for an oncoming restoration, through the Second Advent of Christ, and the establishment of “God’s Kingdom” on earth. Kropotkin, for example, describes how the Church, after a quite promising start, gradually became more and more alienated from the original teaching of Jesus, coming to the point where it made a complete alliance with the rulers to the extent that even the teachings of Jesus came to be regarded as dangerous by the Church itself.¹ Kropotkin’s view is depicted well by another Russian who in his early years participated in socialist circles: Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in his masterpiece *The Brothers Karamazov*, describes how “the Grand Inquisitor” encounters Jesus upon his return to earth, and condemns him for the gift of free will to humanity. Moreover, he

¹ Peter Kropotkin, *Ethics, Origin and Development* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1993), p. 121.

proclaims the collaboration of the Church with secular authorities, with the kingdoms of the earth, Satan himself, in order to secure mankind's happiness.² For Bakunin, Christianity manifests "the impoverishment, enslavement, and annihilation of humanity";³ it is "the bourgeois religion *par excellence*",⁴ whereas according to Goldman, "the Fathers of the Church can well afford to preach the gospel of Christ. It contains nothing dangerous to the regime of authority and wealth".⁵

Moreover, Christianity, as the "official" religion of the western world, obtains a secular character by supporting, through theological argument, the authority that made it the sole dominator in the field of spiritual matters. Consequently, any subversion of the social/political scene, like the one preached by anarchists, was condemned without second thought as a revival of Lucifer's mutiny against God and of Adam and Eve's disobedience that drove them out of Eden.⁶ The harsh criticism and violent oppression of most millenarian movements by the Church is an indicative example of this approach.⁷

Apart from the historical reality, many arguments concerning the incompatibility between Christianity and anarchism also come from the "theoretical" frame of the Christian faith, as it has been formed through the books of the Old and New Testament. Here we can find texts that support patriarchy,⁸ submission to authority and to rulers⁹ and the perpetuation of exploitation.¹⁰ Of course, each side attributes a different value to these passages.

² Fyodor Dostoyevski, *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2003), pp. 334, 343.

³ Mikhail Bakunin, *God and the State* (n.p.: Create Space, 2011), p. 9.

⁴ Bakunin, p. 39.

⁵ Emma Goldman, *The Failure of Christianity*, <http://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/emma-goldman-the-failure-of-christianity.pdf>, [20 Mar 2016], p. 2.

⁶ Genesis 3. King James Version.

⁷ See Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), especially chapters 12 and 13.

⁸ Genesis 16:1-6, 19:6-8, 1 Corinthians 14:34-36, 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

⁹ Exodus 15:26, Matthew 22:15-22, Luke 6:27-30, Romans 13:1-7, Titus 3:1-2, 1 Peter 2:13-17.

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 7:20-22, Ephesians 6:5-8.

Anarchists consider them examples of reactionary politics, whereas Christians regard them primarily as fundamental to obedience to God's will – which for Christians is a different primary concern, and not intended to be reactionary. However, what I am particularly interested in is locating the basic obstacles to the effort of uniting anarchism with Christianity, obstacles that many (anarcho) Christian scholars have tried to overcome in two key ways.

The first way involves the articulation of multiple “anti-paradigms” using the same books of the Holy Bible¹¹ relied upon by patriarchal interpreters, but to emphasise support for a communal way of life with clear anarcho-communist features,¹² disobedience towards secular authorities,¹³ the overcoming of the Law,¹⁴ the project of freedom,¹⁵ the abolition of social, national and cultural norms,¹⁶ and the merciless critique of the rich and the exploiters.¹⁷ Later, I will also refer to some radical practices and discourses of Jesus, as they are presented in the most important part of the New Testament, the four Gospels.

The second approach consists of the effort to give an alternative interpretation to the “anti-anarchist” passages mentioned above, to turn them around and make them part of an antiauthoritarian and liberating view. This reading denies the idea that Christianity and anarchism are incompatible and thus elaborates some of the basic principles of the current of thought and practice called Christian anarchism.¹⁸

¹¹ We can come across such approaches in the works of Jacques Ellul (*Anarchy and Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), especially part II, chapter 1), Thanassis Papathanasiou (*Κοινωνική Δικαιοσύνη και Ορθόδοξη Θεολογία – Μία Προκήρυξη* [Social Justice and Orthodox Theology – A Proclamation] (Athens: Akritas, 2001)) and Giorgio Agamben (*The Time that Remains – A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005)).

¹² Acts 2:44–46. 4:32–37.

¹³ Acts 5:28–30.

¹⁴ Romans 7:6, Galatians 2:16.21. 3:19–20.

¹⁵ Galatians 5:2–6, Colossians 2:16–23, 1 Timothy 4:4–5.

¹⁶ Philippians 3:4–11, Colossians 3:11.

¹⁷ James 5:1–6.

¹⁸ Here I refer to the views of various thinkers (discussed further down in this chapter) as presented in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos ‘Responding to the State: Christian Anarchists on Romans 13, Rendering to Caesar,

In contrast to these approaches, this chapter advances a different argument, consisting of two other components. The first is related to the foundation of this second way of overcoming the obstacles, a foundation which, in my opinion, is a false one. In the main, these efforts are based on the implied authenticity of the Apostles, and especially of Paul, and a uniformed and indivisible perception of what constitutes “the” Christian tradition. The consequences seem problematic, even disastrous: on the one side, we have the exaggerated and hasty effort to justify Paul’s many “anti-anarchist” sayings, and on the other, we deprive ourselves of a creative, active and critical reading of the Scripture. What I mean by this “critical and active reading” is a radical interpretation based on a creative bridging of the Bible’s contradictions, instead of a mainstream and dogmatic perception which eliminates such a possibility, based on a rigid and uniform reading that neglects or even denies the existence of such contradictions.

The second component expresses exactly this need for a different reading of both the biblical texts (and especially the New Testament) and the teaching and life of Jesus, aiming for a totally different interpretative framework in order to restore anarcho-Christian activism, lead it back to what it was before a religious status quo emerged. This framework draws on two inspirational and valuable tools. The first one is Friedrich Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity as a faith favouring death instead of life. Nietzsche unveils the self-denying spirit of Christianity since the present (earthly life) must be sacrificed in favour of the future (afterlife). According to him, praising Jesus’ death on the cross as a means of escaping this life for the sake of heaven is a stance attributed to Paul and characterizes the Christian worldview which, in turn, generates a miserable and passive attitude towards secular authority. The second tool is Walter Benjamin’s critique of violence. Although pacifism occupies a central place in (anarcho) Christian rhetoric, Jesus seems to have made use of violent means that go beyond this pacifistic reading. Benjamin’s distinction between pure and impure violence stresses the difference between

and Civil Disobedience’, in *Religious Anarchism, New Perspectives* ed. by Alexandre Christoyannopoulos (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 106–44.

violence that liberates and violence that enslaves. Whereas the second type is norm-positing and norm-imposing, the first manifests norm-breaking, a violence of pure means which serves no ends.

Both approaches, Nietzschean and Benjaminian, are used in this paper only as methodological tools without touching upon any further implications of the two thinkers for either Christianity or anarchism. Nietzsche's hostility towards anarchism and religious faith in general, Benjamin's theology-soaked libertarian Marxism, as well as the elective affinity between Nietzsche and Benjamin and indeed between the two of them and anarchism¹⁹ are all very interesting themes related to this essay, but going far beyond its narrower objectives. The Nietzschean and Benjaminian angles presented here, offer an opportunity for Christian anarchists to redefine their resistance towards the antichrist state and authority by turning their passive and self-negating stance into an active and life-affirmative practice.

Paul and the problematic "Paulodicy"

Paul, also known as Saul of Tarsus, is an emblematic figure in the history of Christianity. A Hebrew with a pharisaic, religious education, and an extremely cultivated member of the Judaic community, he undertakes the persecution of Christians who are considered blasphemous towards Yahweh.²⁰ He very soon changes sides²¹ and moves from being a merciless persecutor of Christians, to becoming one of the most important heralds of Jesus' message, founding churches across the Roman Empire, and taking on a central pastoral role through his epistles to these church communities. Moreover, he clashes with the Judaic component of

¹⁹ For a more detailed view into this elective affinity between Nietzsche, Benjamin and anarchism see Christos Iliopoulos, *Nietzsche and Anarchism: an elective affinity, and a Nietzschean reading of the December '08 revolt in Athens*, PhD thesis, Loughborough University, 2014, <http://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.631586>.

²⁰ Acts 7:58, 8:1-3.

²¹ Acts 9:1-19.

Christianity,²² arguing that the newly formed Christian community must be perceived not as a Judaic heresy but as a superseding of Judaism.

The central role of Paul in the evolution of the new church had a problematic consequence: he was either overestimated by those who looked upon his sayings, considering them to be of an unquestionable authenticity, or he was criticized, by those who held him responsible for driving Christianity away from Jesus' original teaching, institutionalizing the church and turning it into a means of a spiritual escapism. In both cases, Paul was charged with a burden that surely exceeded him, since neither was he infallible nor was he exclusively responsible for the supposed departure of the Church from its original spirit.

This second category includes thinkers like Tolstoy, Kropotkin and Nietzsche, each for individual reasons. Tolstoy criticized Paul from a Christian point of view, Kropotkin from an anarchist one, and Nietzsche challenged him in the name of a joyful philosophy of life. Taken together, they unleashed a biting critique that, on the one hand, seems to overlook certain historical and psychological factors while, on the other, constitutes a special yeast for the critical approach to Christianity and the overcoming of the incompatibilities concerning the Christianity-anarchism conjunction which I wish to explore.

What scandalizes (Christian) anarchists in the teaching of Paul is mainly the passage from the Letter to Romans that not only calls for submission to secular authorities but also considers them a godsend.²³ These approaches to Paul's sayings by Christian anarchists fall into the two aforementioned types of approach.

The first is expressed as the rejection of Paul as a distorter of Jesus' teaching (Tolstoy's view), or with the rejection of these texts as inauthentic, or by highlighting the many counter examples from his life and teaching that show Paul probably had something else in mind when he was praising secular authorities so provocatively. This last view is shared by James Redford and Timothy Carter – as Alexandre Christoyannopoulos shows²⁴– who urge us

²² Acts 15:1–21.

²³ Romans 13:1–7.

²⁴ See Christoyannopoulos, 'Responding to the State', pp. 106–44.

to take into account the historical context under which the letter to Romans is written, stressing the idea that Paul was trying to protect the Roman Christian community from a pogrom by the imperial authority. This approach is the most realistic since the frequency of Paul's radical stances against the law, and in favour of freedom and equality, should lead us to reject a monolithic reading of his epistles, making greater demands on our interpretative procedures in reading between the lines and trying to reach an overall, coherent, picture of his writings by bridging any ambiguities. Additionally, this can also be confirmed from a detail in his letter to Titus, where Paul suggests that he should behave in a way that will leave no room for any accusations,²⁵ which implies that one of Paul's primary concerns was to avoid provoking the authorities, something that could justify such a blunt praise in his letter to Romans.

On the other side, we have the second type of approach that causes serious problems not only to Paul and his posthumous fame but to Christian anarchism as well. This other type of "Paulodicy" – that is the need to justify Paul for his sayings – consists in the effort of interpreting his anti-anarchist and "authoritative" views in a way that reinforces an anarchist Christian perspective instead of opposing it. Hence, for Vernard Eller, Peter Chelcicky, Archie Penner and others,²⁶ Paul's submission to authority is a force of subversion through forgiveness, love, patience, and trust in God's plan for justice. These views deny that Paul might have had a human weakness in taking on the widespread beliefs of his time concerning (state) authority, or that he was just practicing a "smart" and thoughtful move²⁷ that, nonetheless, led (anarcho) Christianity to resign from fighting for life and turn to an after-death justification of earthly hardships. I will return

²⁵ Titus 2:7–9.

²⁶ The detailed arguments of all these thinkers are also presented Christoyannopoulos, 'Responding to the State'.

²⁷ In this case, which seems quite likely, it is understandable that Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek called Paul the "Lenin of the Church", and Lenin "St. Paul of Communism", an apt connection but not very flattering, at least from a Christian anarchist perspective. For this connection between Paul and Lenin, made by Badiou and Žižek, see Roland Boer, *Lenin, Religion and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 2.

in detail to this second type of approach, exploring Nietzsche's critique of these features and his understanding of the tendencies of Christianity that have turned it from a practice of fighting and living, into a theology of resignation and death.

Nietzsche and Christianity: Dionysos versus (?) the Crucifix

Nietzsche's critique of Christianity is based on its negation and nihilistic attitude towards existence and life: original sin, fall, guilt, the repression of the instincts, the vanity of earthly life, the acknowledgement of the hereafter as the returning to a heavenly condition, the returning to "real" life.

Since the formation of the first church, Paul's main concern, what has been praised, and what has been used as the foundation stone, is "the God on the Cross".²⁸ The sorrow (we need only to remember the hurtful way that, after the original sin, man will be fed from the earth and woman will give birth²⁹) is a "crown witness" against life, a life that is guilty, unfair, something that has to be justified.³⁰ The redemption of life, its justification, must follow the narrow path of a new sorrow, and redemption means that someone – and all his followers – will pass through this hurtful narrow path: God on the Cross. The Crucifix will take the responsibility for the sins of the entire world, will redeem life: Jesus is crucified in order to resurrect, so that humans will return to "real" life, the life of the hereafter.

The binary sorrow-punishment and sorrow-ransom for Nietzsche is a machinery that internalizes sorrow, and turns it against the self, creating the bad, the sinful, and the guilty conscience. It is the machinery through which the Christian acts nihilistically, negating life: on the one hand the construction of guilt and sin, and on the other hand the multiplication of sorrow as the ransom that will "buy the sorrow" of this fallen life.³¹ Even when

²⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, § 51.

²⁹ Genesis 3:16–19.

³⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (London: Continuum, 2002), p. 15.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Christianity praises life and love, in these hymns lie hatred and negation, since “love” refers to a castrated, mutilated and dying life with moral rules and “musts”, with instincts oppressed and denied, a life that is nothing but a blurred shadow of the here-after’s “real” life.

For Nietzsche, being is also anguish but for a different reason. It is pain and anxiety because of the severance of humans from the primal unity, individualization and the struggle for survival. Humans need the creation of an Apollonian illusion, they need art as a conscious illusion that will ease the pain and make them live life as an aesthetic phenomenon. Dionysos comes to cooperate with Apollo by dissolving every now and then the illusions of the latter, by throwing humans into dancing and singing, and the intoxication of the Dionysian wine. The two gods cooperate and create Tragedy, this aesthetic weapon that will ease the anguish of existence.³² Moreover, Tragedy will become the springboard for affirming existence, for accepting and praising life here and now.

Dionysos, the god of joy and wine, dancing and laughter, is the same Dionysos that was cut into pieces by the Titans, offered as dinner to the Olympians and was then reborn – resurrected through Demeter. He is the god that *justifies pain with his life instead of justifying life with his pain*. That means that pain is accepted as an ingredient of life, not as a prerequisite. We live and therefore feel pain, which is justified because we affirm life in all its aspects, adversities and hardships. However, justifying life with pain would mean that we live *for* feeling pain rather than feeling pain *because* we are alive. Hence, Dionysos does not internalize pain, life is just per se “affirming even the hardest pain”.³³

According to Nietzsche, humans lost their innocence when they denied what they are, when they repressed their instincts in the name of a revealed morality, when they demonized pain by identifying it with punishment, and asked to project it on gods that would bear this pain on their behalf;³⁴ when, by internalizing their pain, they created for themselves a bad, guilty conscience.

³² See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*.

³³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, IV, §1052.

³⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, II, 7.

In combination with the praising and beatitude of the weak and the “wrecks of life”, with the reverse of values (now the strong is selfish and arrogant whereas the weak and scared is modest and humble) and the repression of their instincts, this bad conscience led them to resentment: the venom that poisons existence and defines the “good” (weak, slave) in relation to the “bad” (strong, master). From now on, humans are hetero-defined, they no longer build their morality on their own but crawl ascetically and miserably behind a morality that promises a reward in the other world equal to the suffering of this one. They are like a “poor Lazarus” that finds himself in the arms of Abraham only because he suffered under the table of the indifferent rich man. In short: *Dionysos versus the Crucifix*.

However, Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity differs from his critique of Jesus. For the German philosopher whatever followed the crucifixion was a distortion of the Crucifix’s life and work. “Even the word ‘Christianity’ is a misunderstanding, there was really only one Christian, and he died on the cross. The ‘evangel’ died on the cross. What was called ‘evangel’ after that was the opposite of what *he* had lived: a ‘*bad tidings*’, a *dysangel*”.³⁵

Of course, Nietzsche’s basic objections (reversal of values, subversion of the robust Rome, beatitude of the weak) remain valid. The difference is that on the one hand, he recognizes Jesus as the human type strong enough to ruin a morality and self-institutionalize his own – that is, a true generator of values – and on the other hand, he openly questions the originality and Christlikeness of certain passages from the gospels and the rest of the New Testament, especially those referring to punishments, judgments and asceticism.³⁶

Let me underline, at this point, the distinction between an end and a cause. I distinguish between Christ and Jesus. I distinguish between the crucifixion that took place *aiming at* the resurrection of Christ and the opening of a road for the “other world”, and the crucifixion that took place *because of* the way Jesus lived, because

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, §39.

³⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, §45.

of his choice to clash with this world's authorities, a clash that ended with the cross.

Jesus lived with an aim to make his life an example of affirming and approving the present existence. He wanted, like Nietzsche, to make humans carriers of new, subversive values, he consorted with the pariahs of his society, neither to keep them hemmed in the margin – in the way that even today the Church arguably does through charity, for example – nor to make them embrace the dominant values that he was rejecting. He wanted to renovate humans within the standards of a liberating and immoral morality, to make them love what they can be, what they can become, or as Nietzsche used to say, “you have to become who you are”.³⁷ Therefore, Jesus *justified his death with his life*.

On the other hand, Christ died in order to resurrect, in order to expose the reversal of the last nihilistic obstacle: death. He died in order to confirm the existence of the hereafter *only* as a perspective and continuation of this life, not in terms of judgment and punishment but in terms of affirmation, of the “Sacred Yes” to life,³⁸ to naturalism, to everything that constitutes human nature. Is this not, after all, what the events of the violent ousting of the merchants from the temple³⁹ or the approval of the children's innocence⁴⁰ show? In the first case, we have the release of Christ's feelings and thus, without any sentimental repression taking place, the poisoning of the resentment effect is avoided; this instant expression of wrath leaves no place inside him for feelings of hatred to flourish. In the second case, he applauds children's innocence and, in fact, approves their lack of integration to the social and psychological norms and even the cruelty children sometimes display, because this cruelty is not directed personally to their neighbour but is a hearty, impulsive and sincere expression of specific feelings in time and space. Therefore, Christ *justified hereafter with his death*.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, aphorisms 270 and 335.

³⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, I, “Of the Three Metamorphoses”.

³⁹ Matthew 21:12–13.

⁴⁰ Mark 10:13–16.

Jesus and Christ are unified under the personality of the God-man, a being that is a perfect God and a perfect human at the same time. His monolithic perception, like that of the Church from his crucifixion onwards, turns Christianity into a carrier of negation, resignation and dislike of life and human naturalism. There cannot be a resurrected man other than as an affirmation of the here-living man, like resurrected Christ who is the affirmation of Jesus from Nazareth.

Theses and Antitheses for restoring Anarcho-Christian Activism

Through the prism of the Nietzschean critique a new road opens before our eyes: the active reading of the Bible and the utilization of its contradictions in order to construct a different (anarcho) Christianity; a different reading that interprets Christianity as a struggle in favour of life, thus making possible and creative the conjunction of anarchism and Christianity.

Using the Nietzschean critique and the anarchist view as an apparatus, I will now critically re-approach some basic points of anarcho-Christian thinkers, presented in Christoyannopoulos' overview, that I believe inhibit anarcho-Christian activism.

Through an extended effort of understanding/justifying the scandalous passage of Romans 13, prominent thinkers and anarcho-Christians who do not dismiss Paul altogether reach, more or less, three basic and related conclusions:

- a) Secular authorities are an inevitable evil that act in the world with God's tolerance and as his tool for maintaining the world's order for those that have not answered his call.
- b) Anarcho-Christians ought to submit to the state due to love, having, however, always in mind that God's will comes before secular authority.
- c) The subversion of the state and authority must take place in terms of patience, passive resistance and love, preferably never through illegal acts (unless in direct contradiction to God's will), and individuals must always be ready to suffer the consequences of disobedience. After all, even "prison is

a kind of resting place in today's world, a 'new monastery' in which Christians can 'abide with honour'.⁴¹ The vindication of our stiff upper lip together with the vengeance and the just punishment of the authoritarians, all belong to God.

As far as the first conclusion is concerned, God's tolerance of something that is "evil" is definitely an example of respect for human free will. Nevertheless, there is a problem with the second component. If we accept that dominance is something bad for anarcho-Christian morality, then how is it possible for a "virtuous" God to use "evil" means in order to achieve his goals and, even more, to maintain an order that daily, in all its expressions, produces inequalities and exploitation (the classical dilemma of "theodicy")? Let us not forget that every "nation"/state obtained its linguistic idiosyncrasy – one of its fundamental characteristics – as a result of human arrogance, according to the story of the Tower of Babel in the Old Testament.⁴²

The interpretation that an activist anarcho-Christian can give to this point, is mainly the sincere answer that God's will is unknown and every effort for theodicy can end up being an even greater parody than Paulodicy. Nevertheless, this does not imply an agnostic resignation, but rather that the initiative belongs to the anarcho-Christian subjects who are called, through an active interpretation, to self-define (based on their interpretation) and not hetero-define (based on the supposed divine intentions) their actions. Hence, the existence of dominance can hardly be attributed to, or be legitimized by, a divine will.

The second conclusion tends to confuse love with passivity and mildness. The mistake in this case is that a mellow and moderate stance does not always presuppose feelings of love but, as Nietzsche says in his critique, can become the spring of resentful and vengeful feelings. The other way around, a critical, emotionally charged, attitude does not exclude love and interest for the one who stands opposite us. If, for example, we accept the fact that

⁴¹ Christoyannopoulos, 'Responding to the State', p. 135.

⁴² Genesis 11:1–9.

Jesus not only did not feel any hatred but, on the contrary, loved everyone, then his harsh critique of the Pharisees⁴³ or his violent entrance to the Temple of Jerusalem⁴⁴ are stances diametrically opposed to the passivity anarcho-Christians call for in relation to the state and the authorities.

Moreover, it is implied that when authority clashes with God's will, then anarcho-Christians should side with the latter, without second thoughts (of course, again through a patient and passive resistance). However, what also seems to be ignored, is that the existence of state, nation and dominance per se, directly contradict the basic features of human "nature" that are supposed to be synonymous with those of the supposedly loving, virtuous and just God that created humans in his image.⁴⁵ Hence, rupture and clash with the state do not need excuses or further justification. The existence of dominance is a necessary and sufficient condition for subverting it since it opposes God's love and justice.

The third conclusion justifies the Nietzschean critique of quitting life, in favour of a hereafter, and of nourishing sentiments of resentment and vengeance, what Nietzsche calls a *bad conscience*. (Anarcho) Christians seem to underestimate the importance of their earthly presence, considering it as a short passage to the real, after-death life. Additionally, they look towards a divine justification of their practice – meaning, they do not act authentically or unselfishly – and, even worse, put their hopes on God for the punishment of those who harmed them – an anticipation poisoned by the venom of revenge that has nothing to do with love and forgiveness.

Furthermore, the rejection of disobedience whenever it is expressed through "illegal acts" seems rather inappropriate to those who believe that laws are often incompatible with justice. Besides, we should never forget the incident in the Old Testament during the Exodus of the Jews from Egypt:⁴⁶ God advises Moses that all Jews, before leaving, should borrow clothes and objects of

⁴³ Matthew 23:1–33.

⁴⁴ John 2:13–17. This passage will be analysed in more detail further down, in relation to the matter of violence.

⁴⁵ Genesis 1:26–27.

⁴⁶ Exodus 3:21–23.

great value from their Egyptian neighbours with no intention of ever returning them! The third conclusion would imply that this action is thievery and therefore illegal. Nonetheless, Thanassis Papathanassiou gives the different and quite radical interpretation of St. Irenaeus for this incident, cancelling every false dilemma between “legal” and “illegal” procedures. That is, St. Irenaeus opines that what God actually does is to urge Jews to regain a part of all the things that were stolen from them during their slavery in Egypt.⁴⁷ At the very least, God does not always urge passive or lawful obedience.

In conclusion, a restored anarcho-Christian activism calls for a crystallized, responsible and morally autonomous action, with love towards the earthly existence and without feelings of vengeance.

The Debate on Pacifism

What is common in all three of the above conclusions is the strict adoption of pacifist means of action to the extent that any use of violence is viewed as incompatible with an anarcho-Christian perspective. Therefore, I would like to deal separately with this matter since I believe that any fixed position (violence – non violence) is a dangerous dogmatism within Christian anarchism.⁴⁸

Any reference to Christianity as a pacifist current is the conclusion of a reasoning based on Jesus’ teaching about love from the New Testament. There are, however, at least two representative passages of the Gospel, together with a crucial “intervention” of Walter Benjamin regarding the distinction between violence that liberates and violence that subdues, which subverts the pacifist axiom making us revise and “restore” violence within Christianity.

⁴⁷ Thanassis Papathanassiou, *Κοινωνική Δικαιοσύνη και Ορθόδοξη Θεολογία – Μία Προκήρυξη* [Social Justice and Orthodox Theology – A Proclamation], p. 27.

⁴⁸ This conversation takes place in the chapter of Christoyannopoulos mentioned above. Nevertheless for a more detailed reasoning see the exceptional work of the same author in Alexandre Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism, A Political Commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010), and especially sections 2.8 and 4.5.1.

The first incident is the narration of Jesus' entrance into the Temple of Jerusalem, the overturning of the merchant's tables and their ousting. This incident is mentioned by all four evangelists, and if we omit the rather "neutral" narration of Luke⁴⁹ the other three⁵⁰ are quite colourful. On one level, all three agree that Jesus overthrows the merchants' goods and drives them out of the Temple calling them thieves.⁵¹ Then, we have the following slight variations: Mark says that Jesus "would not suffer that any man should carry any vessel through the temple", whereas John says that "when he had made a scourge of small cords, he drove them all out of the temple, and the sheep, and the oxen; and poured out the changers' money, and overthrew the tables".⁵²

It cannot be denied that Jesus acted violently. The overturn of the tables, the casting out of the merchants, the blockage of any exchange, the fear and uneasiness that he probably caused to the merchants, are actions of physical and psychological violence.

The interesting point – after highlighting features of violence in Jesus' behaviour – is that the conversation shifts towards the "degree of violence" taking place and the aspect that this violence was "extremely limited and [. . .] never directed at people".⁵³ The truth is that the relevant passages do not mention the act of physical violence against the merchants but do not consider it impossible either. As Adin Ballou says "as I have an equally good right to imagine how Jesus acted on the occasion, I shall presume that he did nothing unworthy of the principle, the character, and spirit that uniformly distinguished him"⁵⁴ To this, Christoyannopoulos adds: "Although there can be no definitive proof either way, given Jesus' main teaching, the absence of violence is more probable than its presence".⁵⁵ Before exposing the reasons for which Ballou is mistaken to support the non-physical clash between Jesus and

⁴⁹ Luke 19:45–48.

⁵⁰ Matthew 21:12–13, Mark 11:15–17, John 2:13–17.

⁵¹ In fact, this is mentioned in Matthew and Mark, whereas according to John, they are accused of turning the Temple into a shopping centre, but this is still a negative characterization.

⁵² John 2:15.

⁵³ Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism*, p. 105.

⁵⁴ Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism*, pp. 105–106, quoting Ballou.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

the merchants as more probable, I will interject the inspired distinction that Benjamin makes about violence.

In his work, *Critique of Violence*, Benjamin introduces the distinction between *Mythical* and *Divine Violence*. The former is the violence used as a cold means for the fulfilment of a goal, no matter if this goal is about the preservation of an existing law or the creation of a new one. The latter is the violence expressed as a manifestation, a discharge, without being the means of a certain goal. It tends to lead to emancipation, liberation, and not to domination. Benjamin writes:

Just as in all spheres God opposes myth, mythical violence is confronted by the divine. And the latter constitutes its antithesis in all respects. If mythical violence is lawmaking, divine violence is law-destroying; if the former sets boundaries, the latter boundlessly destroys them; if mythical violence brings at once guilt and retribution, divine power only expiates; if the former threatens, the latter strikes; if the former is bloody, the latter is lethal without spilling blood.⁵⁶

Let me note here that divine violence is not just a “pressure valve” that will, later on, let reality return to its lawful and suppressive conditions. When Benjamin leaves an “open window” for these personal relationships that are not characterized by violence but love, compassion and comradeship⁵⁷ he wants to point to the construction of a revolutionary community, where divine violence will have subsided. Besides, as examples from the French and Russian revolutions suggest, if a revolutionary process results in legislative and institutionalized norms, then the divine violence degenerates into the mythical violence, shifting from a liberating and redemptive force against tyranny, to a means of oppression and vengeance, a new tyranny. This may also answer the logical question that rises and constitutes a weak point of Benjamin’s reasoning: what are the limits of a redeeming violence? What happens when such a manifestation leads to the loss of a human

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 297.

⁵⁷ Walter Benjamin, ‘Critique of Violence’, p. 289.

life? For Christian anarchists, every such loss is equally painful. However, taking action cannot and must not be suspended because of such a probability. Only complete inaction, isolation and stagnation can guarantee the eclipse of harmful effects. It is the intentions – as with the example with Jesus in the Temple – that must draw our attention and interest.

This critique of violence by Benjamin completes the critique made by Nietzsche. The violent manifestation of Jesus, the innocent and pure cruelty of children, is nothing but approval and respect for human nature and protection from the venom of resentment. Hence, when Jesus overthrows the tables of the merchants in the Temple, he is probably confronting them at a physical level too. It would be more than strange for a group of people that had turned their commercial and gainful activity in the Temple into a status quo, not to react to the damage of their fortune by someone who did not possess any official authority, religious or political. Even the previous, triumphant, entrance of Jesus in Jerusalem could not have ensured him any immunity for such an aggressive action against the long lasting and widely accepted practice of the merchants, and their fortunes. Therefore, unlike Ballou, I think that what took place was most probably a severe physical conflict between Jesus and his disciples, and the merchants, a conflict that does not necessarily contradict his overall teaching.

According to this Benjaminian logic, his deed is a violent action that, nonetheless, does not seek to punish the merchants. Moreover, it is not the means for a goal that could be described as “restoration of the law that regulates the proper usage of the temple” (through the punishment of those who broke it), but rather a striking against the “law” the merchants had instituted with the open tolerance of the priesthood – that is, divine and not mythical violence.

Jesus’ action is a manifestation of a redeeming violence for the overwhelming rage he feels when he sees the pathetic commercialization of his father’s homestead. He does not use his whip to give a divine punishment but to awaken the merchants from the lethargy caused by their vice. From a Benjaminian angle, therefore, the complementary objection of some Christian anarchists

about violence, an objection that rejects violence as adoption of the same means used by the state,⁵⁸ is irrelevant.

The second incident refers to the context of Jesus' arrest in Gethsemane.⁵⁹ The most colourful narration is that of Matthew, according to which when one comrade of Jesus cuts with his sword the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus asks him to put his sword back, highlighting that "all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword", while he reminds him that if he wished for any help, he could, at any time, ask the angels.

Jesus' comment on the sword underlines the need for a complete realization of one's deed; that actors must always take full "ownership" and conscience of their actions. This realization, and not an a priori "moral imperative", will be the moral criterion for the action. Jesus does not reprimand his comrade for his hastening to defend him with his sword but because he knows that his comrade's action is not conscious, something which is proved just after his arrest, when all of his frightened comrades abandon him. Hence, he gives a warning concerning the realization of the action and not its moral substratum.

On the other hand, the fact that Jesus refers to the legions of angels suggests that under different circumstances he would not deny his physical defence against his armed prosecutors. His voluntary surrender has to do with the imminent and definitive crush of death, through his resurrection, and not with the fulfilment of an anti-violent fetishism.

Finally, my main point is that non-violence does not constitute an essential ingredient of an anarcho-Christian outlook, just like violence does not either. It is, of course, true that non-violence seems to be the main trend in Christian anarchism as well as in Jesus' teaching. However, we have certain historical anti-paradigms from the millenarian revolutions of the Middle Ages,⁶⁰ and we have the dynamic entrance of Jesus into the Temple and his stance

⁵⁸ Christoyannopoulos, *Christian Anarchism*, p. 209.

⁵⁹ Matthew 26:47-56, Mark 14:43-52, Luke 22:47-53, John 18:1-11.

⁶⁰ See for example Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

during his arrest. These do not “legitimize” a Christian violent practice, but equally, they do not reject it. What I have argued in this chapter is that the interpretation of Jesus’ life and teaching remains open and that an alternative reading favours a challenge of the prevailing pacifistic theses, in a Christian anarchist context, based on both historical and (theo)logical arguments. Subsequently, this open interpretation and alternative reading can redefine the Christian anarchist resistance against the State and secular authority by getting rid of the weight of the violence/non-violence pseudo-dilemma and adopting an active rather than a passive stance.

Conclusion

This chapter aims at presenting the points of the anarcho-Christian argument that drive Christian anarchism to hibernation and, eventually lead to an overall negation of life. These points are the passive (resi)stance and the obsession with a pacifist action, in the name of Jesus’ teaching and the supposed divine intentions. On the contrary, a Nietzschean reading offers an analysis of the distinction between Jesus’ life/death and its perception by Paul and the mainstream Church, giving an alternative perspective of the connection between Jesus and life before and after death. Consequently, it leads to a restored (anarcho) Christian activism calling for an interpretation of the Scripture and the Christian tradition based on our relationship with our comrades, as well as with Jesus himself. This interpretation should not be dogmatic, or be by revelation but experiential and active, aiming at accepting life after death only as an affirmation of the earthly life, and not the other way round.

An important stop in this journey, apart from the critique made by Nietzsche, is the treatise of Benjamin that sheds a different light on the issue of violence which constitutes a special debate in the circles of Christian anarchism. By recognizing that violence is an essential characteristic of human “nature”, also present in Jesus’ practice even if not unambiguous, we can approach it through a different lens and restore it as a Christian anarchist practice that will not be essential but neither rejectable.

Nietzsche's reading of Jesus' death not as a prerequisite for an afterlife but, primarily, as an outcome of his self-affirmative life against the authorities of his time, as well as Benjamin's critique of violence, which overcomes the false dilemma between violence and non-violence, redefines Jesus' life and violent practices respectively. Given that Christian anarchists cannot but draw on Jesus' example in order to resist evil and secular authority, redefining this example means to offer a new meaning to this resistance which now becomes active and affirmative instead of passive and resentful.

However, this journey's most important feature cannot be other than our will, as Christian anarchists, to realize here, now, everywhere and for ever the values of Christianity and anarchy and drive the ship that is called Ecclesia towards the open sea of God's Kingdom on earth.

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