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On (Christian) anarchism and (non)violence: a response to Simon Springer

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Introduction: beyond the state

The big picture stories of our age appear to be those of the state. The right commonly argues for the rolling back of the state from welfare provision, yet greater assertion of its control of migration and its intervention to strengthen or transform other, failing states (from Greece to Afghanistan). In turn the left typically defends taxpayer's funding of the public sector whilst resisting the state's surveillance and war-making capacities. Social theorists are obsessed with creating typologies and abstractions that attempt to catch what is happening to the state: "weak" or "strong", "new medievalism" or "globalisation", "resilient" or in "retreat", "failed" or "rising", being "hollowed out" or transformed into "global assemblages", etc. In reading either the newspapers or the literatures in politics, geography and sociology, one could be forgiven for thinking that the state is the only game in town.

It isn't: and that is why Simon Springer's attempts to think about human futures from a starting point other than state processes are so refreshing and so important. I welcome the kind invitation of the editor to respond to Springer's (2014) engagement with my own work in his "War and pieces" intervention.

Springer's concerns and mine have much in common. We both cite Tolstoy and Kropotkin as major influences on our thinking. Crucially, we are both animated by the desire to see geographical scholarship and practice oriented towards the construction of more peaceful human futures, and specifically so by harnessing scholarship towards the advancement of nonviolence. However, it is on the role of Christianity in this project that we part company. Engaging with my agenda for peace research and practice in geography (Megoran, 2011), Springer considers what he calls "religious" and anarchistic arguments for nonviolence. For Springer, the latter is preferable to the former because anarchism entails an "absolute rejection of war in all its myriad forms" whereas "the prejudices organised religion so often entails" tend towards producing violent division (2014, p. 90). In order to enable a more "emancipatory worldview" (p. 87) it is therefore necessary to "go beyond religion" (p. 85) and embrace anarchism.

I consider this argument flawed on a range of empirical and conceptual grounds. However, as this is a response to Springer's paper and not a counter argument, I will focus primarily on one aspect: his apparent assumption that anarchism and Christianity are mutually exclusive alternatives. I show through both anarchist and political theological traditions that they are not. I suggest that Springer makes this mistake because of a flawed concept of "religion", underpinning an assumption that some transhistorical entity under that name leads inexorably to violence,

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whereas something called “anarchism” does not. Although there is not space to develop this argument here, I am keen to promote dialogue between Christian and anarchist thought. Elsewhere Springer writes that “radical geography today needs more than the insights of the past, it also requires a future, an injection of new ideas” (Springer, 2012, p. 1618). I suggest that Christian anarchism can provide just such an injection. Therefore I will briefly finish by posing a foundational question that I think his intervention leaves unanswered, but which points the way forwards to fruitful dialogue between Christian and other traditions of anarchist thought: why, exactly, shouldn’t we kill or otherwise harm people?

The Christian anarchist tradition

Springer’s intervention assumes that religion (and Christianity in particular) and anarchism are incompatible and indeed incommensurable alternatives. According to Springer, religion is generally productive of violence and anarchism of nonviolence, therefore in order to advocate nonviolence it is necessary to “go beyond religion” and embrace anarchism.

Springer’s argument hinges on the assumption that one cannot be both a Christian and an anarchist. This is belied in the extensive literature on, and historical practice of, Christian anarchism. The New Testament has much to say on the presence of *archē* and *archōn*, variously translated from Greek as “powers”, “governments”, “administrations”, “thrones”, “kingdoms”, “empires”, “states”, “forms of rule”, and so forth (Wink, 1984). In an influential intervention theologian Walter Wink suggests that these include monarchs, realms, administrations, militaries, appointed and elected officials, rulers of religious institutions, laws, nations, economies, political institutions, systems of governance, ideologies, universities, and so forth (Wink, 1984). There is much debate amongst theologians on the extent to which these “powers” are benign or malign, and the attitude of deference or resistance that we should adopt towards them. But Christian theologians agree that they are temporal not eternal and are subordinate to God, and thus have no legitimate claims to unconditional allegiance.

Anarchism (literally: un-*archē*, without rule) is, for Vernard Eller, “the state of being unimpressed with, disinterested in, sceptical of, nonchalant toward, and uninfluenced by the highfalutin claims of any and all arkys” (Eller, 1987, p. 2). For Eller, Christian anarchy is: “A Christianly motivated ‘unarkyness.’” Other thinkers adopt the position of not so much of being disinterested in, but of opposing the powers/arkys (I quite like Eller’s “Anglicization”). For social theorist and Christian anarchist, Jacques Ellul, Christianity means “a rejection of power and a fight against it” (Ellul, 1991, p. 12) and is therefore anarchism. He sees the Bible as a source of anarchy, Jesus advocating not “desocialization” of withdrawal and disengagement, but “that we should stay in society and set up in it communities which obey other rulers and other laws” (p. 62). This is a “pacifist, antinationalist, anticapitalist, moral, and antidemocratic anarchism (i.e. that which is hostile to the falsified democracy of bourgeois states)”, which “acts by means of persuasion, by the creation of small groups and networks, denouncing falsehood and oppression, aiming at a true overturning of authorities of all kinds as people at the bottom speak and organize themselves” (Ellul, 1991, pp. 13–14).

Strong anarchist themes can be detected in a range of political theologians who might not readily identify themselves as anarchist. The best known of these is Tolstoy (1905), whom Springer cites and recognises as a Christian but effectively removes him from this category in order to sustain his argument (Springer, 2014, p. 88; see below next section). Other major figures include John Yoder (1994 [1972]), William Cavanaugh (2004), Brian Walsh & Sylvia Keesmat (2004) and, as already mentioned, Walter Wink (1998).

These thinkers (from a range of theological traditions including Anabaptist and Catholic) also include activist/thinkers like Dorothy Day (1952), founder of the anarchist Catholic Workers

movement that lives with and serves the vulnerable in “Houses of Hospitality” and has established farming communes of non-capitalist Christian living in self-organised cooperative communities. Day herself was heavily influenced by Kropotkin. Likewise of note is William Stringfellow (1973), lay theologian and radical US lawyer who worked on behalf of racial minorities in inner city USA (Megoran, 2012). These writers and activists combine a critique of state power and violence with a commitment to local church congregations as alternative spaces creating counter-cultural communitarian societies that celebrate the “revolutionary potential of love, forgiveness and sacrifice” (Christoyannopoulos, 2011, p. 239). In his major synthesis of the tradition, Alexandre Christoyannopoulos says what connects these thinkers is the argument that “Christianity logically implies a form of anarchism” (Christoyannopoulos, 2011, p. 13).

In an essay that quotes at length from the Bible (Christianity’s primary source material), Kemmerer (2009) summarises the parallels of Christian and anarchist thought for a definitive anthology of “anarchy in the academy.” As anarchy entails the rejection of the centralised authority of a unitary state, so the Hebrew Bible (Christian Old Testament) teaches that “choosing to have an earthly ruler is tantamount to rejecting the rule of God” because “Christianity teaches that God is the one and only true king of humanity.” The New Testament “neither recommends nor respects secular rule”: the good shepherd parable (Bible, John chapter 10) teaches “the danger of trusting the government” (Kemmerer, 2009, p. 204). As anarchy rejects hierarchical power structures, so Jesus taught his disciples, when “a dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest,” that:

The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves ... I am among you as one who serves. (Luke, 22, pp. 24–26)¹

Kemmerer continues: as anarchy cultivates “brotherhood” (Berkman), “mutual aid” (Kropotkin) and the like, the New Testament “portrays early Christian communities as communal, like the ideal anarchist communities described by Berkman, Proudhon, & Chomsky” (Kemmerer, 2009, p. 205).² As anarchy rejects the violence of the state, so Christianity insists (as Tolstoy has it) that even the legal system is to be rejected by Christians, for whereas courts repay evil for evil, Jesus taught his followers to love and forgive, not punish, their enemies. Furthermore, just as Kemmerer regards anarchism as a living force, not merely a philosophy, so “like anarchy, religion is meant to be lived” (Kemmerer, 2009, p. 208). Finally, Kemmerer finds that “Rebellion against unjust authority is fundamental to both anarchy and Christianity” (Kemmerer, 2009, p. 209). In conclusion, Kemmerer contends that “Christianity provides an apt example of religious teachings that discourage submission to secular powers, hold humankind accountable to principles that supersede secular rule, and require a way of life that will ultimately lead to anarchy in both faith and practice” (Kemmerer, 2009, p. 210).

The importance of Christian anarchism is recognised beyond Christian circles. In his authoritative history of anarchism, Peter Marshall insists that “Anarchism is not necessarily atheistic any more than socialism is” (Marshall, 1992, p. 75). Marshall observes that the Old Testament shows political power as invariably harmful – from the lamentable catalogue of systematic Jewish misrule that occupies the historical portions of the Hebrew Bible, to the ridiculous pomposity and tyranny of rulers in exile such as Babylonian Kings Darius and Nebuchadnezzar, who respectively threw Daniel into a lion’s den and his friends into a furnace for refusing to worship the head of state (see Daniel, chapters 6 and 3). In the New Testament, as we have seen, Marshall claims that Jesus “consistently held political authority up to derision” and that his movement contained a strong communalistic as well as libertarian vein (Marshall, 1992, p. 75). Marshall traces this

anarchistic trend in church history, from the early “church fathers”, through medievals like Aquinas, reformers such as the Anabaptists, and Romantics including Blake, to leading modern anarchist thinkers and creators of intentional communities like Adin Ballou in the nineteenth and the Catholic Worker Movement in the twentieth. It is worth quoting at some length his summary of the Christian anarchist position:

To deny the authority of state and church does not necessarily mean a denial of the authority of God. The law of God, like natural law, can offer a standard by which to live and to oppose man-made law. We are coerced into accepting the latter, while we can accept or reject the former according to voluntary choice. Jesus undoubtedly provides an enduring libertarian example by refusing to collaborate with the Roman rulers, by rejecting the financial benefits of the Sadducees, and by encouraging people to liberate themselves and to form communities based on voluntary association and common property. Jesus dealt with wrongdoers by confronting them and then forgiving them By not resisting evil, by turning the other cheek, he taught that we should not participate in violence towards others. Since government is organized violence *par excellence*, a genuine reading of the Sermon on the Mount must logically lead to the rejection of all earthly government (Marshall, 1992, p. 85)³

Marshall concludes that despite the opposition of many classic anarchist thinkers “anarchism is by no means intrinsically anti-religious”, and indeed “[the twentieth] century has witnessed a remarkable flourishing of Christian anarchism from a variety of traditions” (Marshall, 1992, p. 85).

Another leading scholar of anarchism, Ruth Kinna, recognises that “Christian anarchists played a leading part” in anarchist movements to create “intentional communities” (Kinna, 2005, p. 113). Colman McCarthy (2009) argues that in order “to counter the violence of the state, anarchism needs pacifism.” He cites a number of cases where Christian communities and ideas played a significant role in nonviolent revolution, including Poland (1989) and the Philippines (1986), and quotes Archbishop Desmond Tutu that: “Sharing our wealth is the best weapon against terrorism” (McCarthy, 2009, p. 178). Finally, Kropotkin himself recognised “Christian Anarchism” as one of the major “directions” of anarchism (Kropotkin, 1910–11, p. 917). Taking Tolstoy as exemplifying this tradition, he argued that because the Russian thinker combined his theological arguments so well with “a dispassionate observation of the present evils” his arguments “appeal to the religious and the non-religious reader alike” (Kropotkin, 1910–11, p. 918).

Christian anarchist ideas are increasingly influential. An example is UK Christian political activist Jonathon Bartley, whose book *Faith and Politics After Christendom* is subtitled *The Church as a Movement for Anarchy* (Bartley, 2006). Bartley argues that early Christianity saw itself as “the beginning of a new humanity and a new political community”, with networks of people enjoying a freedom “that abolished all distinctions of ethnicity, class and gender and thus defied and subverted a social order that was actually built on them” (Bartley, 2006, p. 17). Because “the values of the [Roman] Empire were diametrically opposed to what the new kingdom stood for” (Bartley, 2006, p. 26), these Christian communities “called into question the legitimacy of working in certain professions, and especially in government or the army”. They found it “impossible to take responsibility for any penalty or imprisonment, disenfranchisement, power of life or death, exposure of infants, gladiatorial games, abortion or the carrying out of any death sentence pronounced by a martial or criminal court” (Bartley, 2006, p. 28). As a result they withdrew from those spheres of state politics to build alternative spaces that affirmed life and freedom, and were sometimes martyred as a result. This changed with “Christendom”, however, when in the fourth century Roman emperors co-opted the faith, aligning the church to political power. Christianity now became territorialised and tied to citizenship. It moved from being

persecuted to persecutor, freedom to imposition, from opposed to imperial power to useful in legitimising imperial rule and justifying imperial violence (Bartley, 2006, pp. 32–52). Bartley’s call for the church to recover its vocation as a “movement for anarchy” has made it one of the most influential books on contemporary British Christianity in recent years.

None of this is to claim that there are not many debates between Christian and mainstream anarchist thinkers on issues such as the authority of God and the possibility of creating sustainable anarchist communities. But the extensive tradition of Christian anarchist thought and practice demonstrates that Springer’s assumption that one cannot be both Christian and anarchist is untenable.

The meaning of “religion”

The rich history of Christian anarchism collapses Springer’s Christian versus anarchist opposition. But a more interesting question is: how is it that he has been able to ignore or discount this literature? Briefly, I suggest that this is due to the chief conceptual flaw of his intervention, namely his failure to interrogate the taken-for-granted category of “religion” that underpins his argument. Nowhere does he offer a definition of it. Tellingly, his bibliography contains not a single reference to the voluminous and vibrant literatures on religion and violence in religious studies, the sociology of religion, anthropology, political theology or history – or, most surprising, the Christian anarchist tradition introduced above.

Instead he invokes “religion” as a monolithic category – what he repeatedly calls “organised religion” or “organised religious teaching.” This is not defined, but it is apparently somehow responsible for violence from the Reconquista, the Crusades, and the Thirty Years War, to the Troubles in Northern Ireland and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Springer, 2014). But he adds certain caveats. For example Tolstoy, whom Springer respects and who is one of history’s most important anarchist figures, was a very devout and influential Christian thinker; Springer however effectively removes him from the category of “religion” on the basis that he “rails against the institution of the Church” and was excommunicated by it Springer, 2014 (p. 88). Similarly, he accepts that aspects of belief systems such as Buddhism may offer worldviews he regards as more wholesome, so these are classified as “religious philosophies” rather than organised religion.

This is deeply problematic. Wars – and certainly those he refers to above – are rarely mono-causal (Pearse, 2007) and cannot be reduced to simplistic explanations of “religion.” For example, the Thirty Years War contained numerous cases of Catholics and Protestants allying with each other against their supposed co-religionists as new forms of the state were built and consolidated at the expense of local elites (Cavanaugh, 2009). The Israeli-Palestinian conflict dates to the creation of the territorial nation-state of Israel and is sustained by the policies of the Israeli state (Weizman, 2007; White, 2009); also by a Palestinian counter-quest for statehood, and by the backers of both sides. Springer’s approach effectively writes political choices and histories of the state out of the explanation, and is thus deeply problematic. For Springer, the problem is simply some ahistorical entity called “religion.”

This approach is what Christian anarchist political theologian William Cavanaugh (2009) terms, in a major text on the issue, “the myth of religious violence.” This myth is that something called “religion” is “a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from ‘secular’ features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence” (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 3). Cavanaugh argues that there is no such essence, as it is shown to be incoherent when specific cases are considered (which he goes into in some detail). What counts as secular or religious in any given context is a function of specific power configurations. Cavanaugh argues that the idea of something called “religion” was created with the emergence of the modern European state system, justifying the violence

of the state and the idea that “killing and dying in the name of the nation-state is laudable and proper” (Cavanaugh, 2009, pp. 4–5). This concept of religion was borrowed from or imposed by Westerners in much of the world during colonisation (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 9). The essentialist idea of a transcultural and unchanging entity termed religion that is essentially prone to violence “is one of the foundational legitimating myths of the liberal nation-state” (Cavanaugh, 2009, p. 4): it was born in violence and is used to justify violence today.

The contribution of Christian anarchism here is to demonstrate how the state purveys violence not just through its actions, but through how it has colonised the imaginations through the “myth of religious violence” and indeed the very category of “religion.” Christian and other forms of anarchism should resist this colonisation by refusing to think within the terms set by the state.

That is not of course to deny that Christianity (like Islam, Buddhism, atheism, secularism, nationalism, feminism, democracy, Marxism, etc.) has historically been implicated in violence in multiple ways. Indeed, some of the harshest critics of Christianity in this regard are Christian anarchists. Christoyannopoulos (2011) observes that “Christian anarchists like Ellul are just as critical as secular ones of the sort of Christianity that has waged wars” (Christoyannopoulos, 2011, p. 5). My own research has shown how Christian remembering of past conflicts can be both productive (Megoran, 2006; Megoran, 2009) and ameliorative (Megoran, 2010; Megoran, 2012) of violence and the geopolitical visions that underpin or undermine it. Springer suggests that I do not “fully come to terms with the prejudices organised religion so often entails” (Springer, 2014, p. 90). However the evidence of my published work, which is deeply critical of how my own community has been implicated in violence, refutes that charge. As I wrote in a position piece in 2004, the peculiar challenge facing a Christian political geographer studying war is that “Christians have been responsible for so much of it”! (Megoran, 2004, p. 41). For me, the goal is neither to propagate the “myth of religious violence” as Springer does, nor to advance a counter myth of religious pacificity. Neither serves to advance human understanding. It is far more fruitful to carefully interrogate under what circumstances certain convictions, institutions, communities and practices are productive of peace or of violence – or both.

This approach must also be applied to anarchism, a move strikingly lacking in Springer’s paper. The brief history of formal anarchist thought shows the movement is ambivalent about the use of violence. From the nineteenth century idea of stirring up insurrections by acts of violence (“propaganda by the deed”) and Bakunin’s celebration of destructive revolutionary violence, to twentieth century anarchist thought endorsing guerrilla and terroristic violence, many anarchists have concluded that violence is unavoidable or necessary (Kinna, 2005, pp. 132–133, 158–160). This is not simply marginal “extremists” who can easily be dismissed: Reclus supported or was ambivalent about French colonialism (Kearns, 2009, pp. 190–193) and Kropotkin the 1914 Franco-British imperial war on Germany (Kinna, 2005, p. 52). Of course, many anarchists have critiqued these trends. As Amster et al. remind us: “There are as many varieties of anarchism as there are anarchists” (Amster, Deleon, Fernandez, II, & Shannon, 2009, p. 2). Springer however writes this ambiguity out of his ahistorical account of anarchism, by declaring “the moment violence enters the equation of whatever social action is being called forth under the name of ‘anarchism’, it ceases to actually be anarchism” (Springer, 2014, p. 86).

What Springer does here is to start with an assumption that something called “religion” equates with violent whereas something called “anarchism” equates with not-violent. Anything that would transgress this simple binary by appearing to be not-violent religion or violent anarchism can thus be invalidated as evidence. It is a method that, as he states with apparent relief, allows him to keep his “skepticism for organised religion intact” (Springer, 2014, p. 89). A method that uses categories to render an argument impervious to counter-evidence is not a promising way to advance understanding.

Future directions

Simon Springer argues that whereas his avowed commitment to nonviolence is consistent with his espousal of anarchism, mine is inconsistent with Christianity. Two assumptions lie behind this argument. The first is that Christianity and anarchism are separate and mutually exclusive traditions. By outlining the Christian anarchist tradition, I have shown that this assumption is false. I argue that this flaw in his argument is based on a second assumption, that an ahistorical entity called “religion” leads inexorably to violence whereas something called “anarchism” does not. This assumption, I suggest, is not tenable in the light of studies on violence in anarchism and on peace in religion. Rather, it depends on an uncritically invoked “myth of religious violence” and an unexamined and essentialist concept of religion. I suggest that it is more illuminating to explore carefully under what circumstances particular worldviews and belief systems are productive of varying types of violence or peace. This is a project which Christian and (other) anarchist geographers can surely contribute to together.

As an example of how Christian anarchism can usefully dialogue with other traditions of anarchism, I finish with a question that Simon’s paper provokes for me: why *shouldn’t* we kill or harm others? Simon apparently assumes that we shouldn’t, but does not provide an argument to explain why. Mammals commonly fight their own species in the struggle to survive and reproduce. What is it about human beings that makes us any different and enables us to advocate the eschewal of violence? What is the basis of what political philosopher Charles Taylor (1989, p. 8) describes as “our ineradicable sense that human life is to respected”? If atheism is correct, then there is no more inherent value to human life than there is to ants or asteroids. Furthermore, any struggle for peace or justice must ultimately be viewed as futile when, as the second law of thermodynamics would lead us to expect, life in the universe eventually comes to an end (Alexander, 2001, pp. 246–247). The Christian (anarchist or otherwise) case for nonviolence is based on the Biblical assertion that human beings are made in the “image of God” (Bible, Genesis 1: 27) by a loving Creator. Therefore “every person who crosses our path, is a gift from the Creator’s hands, to be treasured, honoured, treated with respect” (Atkinson, 1990, pp. 25–26). Or as Rev Martin Luther King Jr. memorably puts it, “Man, for Jesus, is not mere flotsam and jetsam in the river of life, but he is a child of God” (King, n.d., p. 12). For me the key question raised by Springer’s intervention is not whether anarchism provides better grounds than Christianity for nonviolence, but whether anarchism can offer *any* convincing grounds for nonviolence *without* either Christianity or some alternative valorisation of the inherent worth of human being.

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Notes

1. All Bible references are to the 1973 New International Version, Hodder and Stoughton, London.
2. This is recorded in chapters 1–4 of the Acts of the Apostles, a New Testament section that provides a historical account of the emergence of the church after the ascension of Jesus Christ. For example: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people.” (Acts 2, pp. 42–47).

3. Marshall arguably goes too far here: not all Christian anarchist thinkers would “deny” or “reject” all “earthly government”, but would recognise that it has a limited role in ordering social life for the common good (in this they again parallel some atheistic or agnostic secular thought, Kinna, 2005, pp. 67–69). But earthly arkys cannot deal with human selfishness and rejection of divine mandates to love others and the world – such transformation is possible only through the grace and power of God accessible to humans through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus states (or universities, religious organisations, peace movements, communes, etc.) cannot be a source of “salvation”: their arrogant pretences to control human futures and create free and ideal societies must always be mistrusted and resisted.

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