

CHRISTIAN ANARCHISM: COMMUNITARIAN OR CAPITALIST?

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1. Introduction

ALEXANDRE CHRISTOYANNOPOULOUS'S *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospels* synthesizes various perspectives on Christianity that contain radical implications for political philosophy and the practice of real-world politics. By bringing the insights of several key authors together in a single volume, Christoyannopoulos provides a coherent outline of an eclectic mix of scholarship and popular writings. He also manages to preserve the dissimilarities in interpretation and approach, while weaving these disparate accounts into a consistent narrative. The implication of this narrative is exemplified in a quote by Leo Tolstoy on the first page of the manuscript: "Christianity in its true sense puts an end to the State. It was so understood from its very beginning, and for that Christ was crucified."

Although there are many differences in thought amongst the authors which Christoyannopoulos surveys, one is significantly more divisive than the others: the form of the institutions that non-State societies ought to enact. Of particular importance to libertarians is the dispute over the institution of private property. On one side of this dispute are the anarcho-communitarians, who contend that property must be collectively owned and put to use for the good of the community. On the other are the anarcho-capitalists, who maintain that private property is perfectly consistent with the

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teachings of Christ. My goal here is not to settle definitively the dispute, but to address this single margin of disagreement.¹ Drawing from the sources considered by Christoyannopoulous, I argue that the Christian anarcho-capitalists have, thus far, developed a more consistent theoretical framework than the anarcho-communitarians. This consistency is fostered by their insights into the nature of property, which is rooted in the tradition of natural law. In contrast, Christian anarcho-communitarians have no theory of property; thus they cannot set forth any consistent relationship between property, the rights of the individual, and the wellbeing of the community.

While my goal is fairly narrow, the issue is an important one. The relationship between group ideology and private property is obviously important to scholarship of the free society. But due in part to the influence of authors such as Rand (1982) and Posner (1996), the study of Christianity from a libertarian perspective has been discouraged on positive grounds. As Stringham (2006: 3) recognizes, this is a mistake: “Western ideas and institutions are heavily influenced and may even depend on religion...so discounting religious writers means ignoring potentially important works.” Omitting study of a tradition central to Western history and thought necessarily leads to an incomplete picture of libertarianism and limits the possibility of fruitful intellectual discourse.

2. Contrasting Views on Private Property

“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”²

The communitarian critique of private property advanced by Christian anarchists is decidedly Marxist in tone.³ Christoyannopoulous notes that Leo

¹ In what follows, I present several of the most important arguments for and against private property in the Christian anarchist tradition. Even within this tradition the more narrow issue of private property receives less attention than the larger political project of justifying anarchism via Biblical exegesis or other hermeneutical exercises. Famous works include Tolstoy (1902?; 2001) and Ellul (1991); less foundational but still noteworthy are Yoder (1998), Eller (1987), Elliot (1990), and Andrews (1999). See Christoyannopoulous (2011: 14-17) for summaries, as well as coverage of “fellow travelers” (26-30) of Christian anarchism who do not fit within the scope of this paper.

² Matthew 7:12, NRSV.

³ Despite this tone, there is little evidence that any of the more prominent Christian anarchist thinkers (with the exception of Jacques Ellul, as will be discussed later) thought highly of Marx’s ideas. Tolstoy in particular is suspicious of Marxism

Tolstoy, the most prolific (and arguably the most important) Christian anarchist writer, takes this position. Tolstoy claims that the very institution of private property is exploitative: While it claims to safeguard one's right to the product of his or her labor, it is actually used as a method of forcibly extracting that product from its rightful owner, the worker (Christoyannopoulos 2011: 122). In fact, Tolstoy goes so far as to classify the economic system of his times as "slavery" (quoted in Christoyannopoulos 2011: 123) and argues that money, rather than a beneficial and (morally) innocent medium of exchange, is another instrument of slavery due to its inseparable connection to the violent extraction of the worker's produce by the State (124). Hugh Pentecost, another important Christian anarchist thinker, echoes these sentiments, arguing that the greatest injustice is the (State-protected) right of ownership to land: "[a] taker of ground rent is exactly like a person who compels a starving man to deliver up his bag of gold for a crust of bread" (quoted in Christoyannopoulos 2011: 122).

Another anarcho-communitarian covered by Christoyannopoulos, considered by that author to be second only to Tolstoy in importance (2011: 16), is Jacques Ellul, the influential 20th century sociologist and lay theologian. Ellul, unlike other Christian anarcho-communitarians, was heavily influenced by Marxist thought, especially the theory of alienation. This theme is evident in his most expansive work on the subject, *Anarchy and Christianity* (1991), and features prominently in his views on economics. In *Money and Power* (1984: 20, emphasis in original) he writes, "One of the results of capitalism that we see developing throughout the nineteenth century is the subservience of *being* to *having*. This result makes allegiance to capitalism virtually impossible for a Christian." Lest the "virtually" be seen as troublesome, Ellul (1969: 31-32) states his case even more plainly:

Christians are duty-bound to exhibit true socialism, that is, Christianity integrally lived, with the just division of goods and basic equality. Let us joyfully adopt a form of social life that is better suited to our times and more conformed to the spirit of the gospel. Thus we shall prevent others from confusing God and religion with the oppressors of the poor and the workers. Feudalism, capitalism and imperialism are in fact the oppressors.

(Christoyannopoulos 2011: 164, footnote 116). Most Christian anarchists reject Marxist calls for revolution, preferring instead peaceful change through witness to what they regard as the true message of Christ (164-171).

Rather than being the exception, Christoyannopoulous shows that these beliefs are common amongst Christian anarchists:

Christian anarchists are therefore suspicious of most conventional theories about the economy. These theories tend to be articulated by the more comfortable social classes, predictably exalt the status quo as sacrosanct if admittedly slightly unfair, and lead to proposed amendments that are not nearly radical enough since they hinge on the preservation of the foundations of the status quo. In the meantime, the economic enslavement of the masses continues undeterred (124).

It is clear from this account that Christian anarcho-communitarians are the majority voice in the anarchist interpretations of the Gospels.⁴

On the other side, Christoyannopoulous points to a lengthy essay by James Redford as the most significant defense of Christian anarcho-capitalism (24).⁵ Redford (2011: 8) argues that the Golden Rule, articulated by Christ during the Sermon on the Mount, leads naturally to the non-aggression principle—the recognition that the initiation of violence against another human being is by definition immoral. Redford goes on to show how, following this principle, the homesteading of previously unowned resources and the consensual (peaceful) transfer of these resources naturally arises as a consequence of human beings attempting to satisfy their wants. Furthermore, any attempt to collectivize ownership of resources against the will of those who justly acquired them would be a violation of the non-aggression principle and hence the Golden Rule. In this sense, Redford's account is consistent with those of Rothbard (1998) and Hoppe (2010).

⁴ One author included by Christoyannopoulous who cannot be pigeonholed so easily is Vernard Eller. While his most important contribution to Christian anarchist thought, *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers* (1987), deals with the appropriate Christian response to worldly power structures, he treats property and possession in *The Simple Life: The Christian Stance Towards Possessions* (1973). The theme of the work is simple living, and his analysis does not explicitly rule out the institution of private property. Nevertheless one cannot help but sense the traditional anarcho-Christian suspicion of wealth accumulation in his analysis.

⁵ Redford's *apologia*, while unpublished, is (thus far) the only systematic defense of Christian anarcho-capitalism. His work mostly dovetails with the other significant outlets of Christian anarcho-capitalist thought from online sources, such as "Vine and Fig Tree." In contrast, other writers publishing online works on this subject are often anarcho-capitalists in the tradition of Murray Rothbard, who sometimes put forth Biblical defenses of this system.

Thus the capitalist interpretation of Christian anarchism complements the philosophy of natural law and its position on property. Broadly, this point of view regards self-ownership as a self-evident feature of existence. Since one owns oneself, one has the right to undertake whatever actions one believes will improve one's life, provided these actions do not violate the nonaggression principle, i.e. do not initiate aggression against others or their (justly acquired) property. In this sense private property is a naturally arising relationship between man and nature, not an artificial instrument of exploitation. While it is of course possible for one to use one's property to exploit or otherwise aggress against others, there is no *a priori* reason this must be the case.⁶ In fact, the institution of private property, properly understood, is the institutionalization of the avoidance of conflict and exploitation, rather than its source (Hoppe, 2004; see also Demsetz, 1967, for the seminal positive account).

These divergent beliefs on the nature of private property are best illustrated through their juxtaposition with each side's position regarding one of the more controversial tensions within Christian anarchist thought: Christ's call for pacifism on the one hand, and His cleansing of the temple on the other.

3. Implications

"You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well..."⁷

"Then Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who were selling and buying in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the moneychangers and the seats of those who sold doves."⁸

Christian anarcho-communitarians are almost exclusively pacifist, taking literally Christ's command not to resist evil by force.⁹ As

⁶ This formulation also holds for "fellow travelers" of natural law philosophy such as Aristotelian virtue ethics (e.g. Rasmussen and Den Uyl 1991, 2005) and, provided one confines oneself solely to the theory of property, Objectivism (e.g. Peikoff 1993).

⁷ Matthew 5:38-40, NRSV.

⁸ Matthew 21:12, NRSV. Alternative accounts, plus Christ's teachings which follow, can be found in Mark 11:15-19 and 11:27-33, and Luke 19:45-48 and 20:1-8.

⁹ Even Ellul, the Christian anarcho-communitarian most sympathetic to Marxism, rejects violence. Ellul (1969: 127-128) recognizes the expediencies of violence but rejects

Christoyannopoulos notes: “According to Christian anarchists, anarchism is closer to the ‘social order’ envisaged by Jesus than any alternative ‘of which force is a component.’ They believe Christian anarchism to be ‘an inevitable corollary of Christian pacifism’” (46). Thus, communitarian Christian anarchists reject force both at the societal level (warfare) and at the individual level (right of self-defense or prosecution in courts of laws).^{10, 11} How do they reconcile this position with Christ’s use of force in His cleansing of the temple?

The answer, considering the justifications Christoyannopoulos puts forth, is “poorly.” Christoyannopoulos includes Elliot’s (1990: 166) defense of this act based on Christ’s condemnation of the temple’s status as a symbol of a repressive political-economic system. Other accounts (Yoder 1994: 42-43; Christoyannopoulos 2011: 85) equivocate over whether Christ’s actions could truly be considered violent. Ellul (1969: 17) mentions the temple cleansing as an example of a justification of violence used by other (typically non-anarchist) Christians, but does not reconcile it with his argument for nonviolence, beyond making the assumption that Christ’s commandments take precedence over His actions. The most telling verses, however, are Christoyannopoulos’s assertions that “Most Christian anarchists...argue that any violence is extremely limited, and that it is never directed at people” (85) and “...any violence used has as sole purpose the casting out of animals, and is anyway never directed at human beings” (104). This is an awkward attempt

it as a method of social change, favoring instead resisting violence through embracing the doctrine of Christ:

What Christ does for us is above all to make us free. Man becomes free through the Spirit of God, through conversion to and communion with the Lord. This is the one way to true freedom. But to have true freedom is to escape necessity or, rather, to be free to struggle against necessity. Therefore I say that only one line of action is open to the Christian who is free in Christ. He must struggle against violence precisely because, apart from Christ, violence is the form that human relations normally and necessarily take. In other words, the more completely violence seems to be of the order of necessity, the greater is the obligation of believers in Christ's Lordship to overcome it by challenging necessity.

¹⁰ Christoyannopoulos also notes that some authors consider Christ’s command ontological, while others see it as strategic and consequentialist. See the subsection “Christian Anarchist ‘Thinkers,’” pages 13-26 for an overview of the main thinkers and their various positions.

¹¹ Tolstoy (1902?; 2001), and more recently Yoder (1960, 1992, 1994), are arguably the foundational thinkers on this issue.

to rationalize the divergence between Christ's actions and His commandments.

The Christian anarcho-capitalist explanation avoids this problem by employing a natural law argument. In the tradition of natural law, any aggression on a person's property is equivalent to an aggression on that person proper. The reason is simple: the acquisition of property requires the expenditure of resources, most fundamentally effort (labor) and time. This investment is only undertaken on the premise that the property to be acquired will more than compensate the reduction in welfare exhibited by the expenditure of effort. To aggress against someone's property, for example to steal it, thus leaves the property owner without the fruits of his labor, *even though he has already expended the resources required to acquire it*. The aggression against the property reduces the welfare of the property owner via a reduction in his livelihood; it is in essence an aggression against the property owner *qua* human being. Admittedly in many cases it is less severe than a physical attack on the property owner, but this approach implicitly recognizes that it is solely a difference in magnitude. Conceptually, there is no difference in kind.¹²

Taking the non-aggression principle as a primary, the only justification for an act of aggression is in response to a previous aggression. Redford's (2011: 33-34) account makes a case for Christ's aggression against the temple vendors based on the vendors' acts of fraud, which in the tradition of natural law can be shown to be a form of aggression. Bryan Caplan (2009), defending Rothbard, provides an example:

If you accept the initial libertarian equation of "coercion" with non-consensual use of others' property, then the impermissibility of fraud follows. If you offer me a Mitsubishi 5500 projector in exchange for \$2000, and hand me a box of straw instead, you are using my \$2000 without my consent (which was contingent, of course, on you giving me the projector).

Thus Christ's use of force was justified by the previous act of aggression on the part of the temple vendors. This aggression by the temple vendors nullified any legitimate title to their property. But what of Christ's commandment to turn the other cheek? Redford (2011: 34) contends that Christ's divine nature gave him insight into the fraudulence of the temple vendors that would not have been available to mortal men. In other words, Christ was in the unique position to *know* the temple vendors were behaving

¹² See Rothbard (1970: 240-256; 1998: Part II, especially Chapters 8-9) for a more in-depth treatment.

fraudulently, so Christ's use of violence was righteous and not in violation of the non-aggression principle (which, remember, directly follows from the Golden Rule). But mortal men with limited knowledge could only *suspect* fraudulent behavior, so Christ's command of nonviolence still applies to them.¹³ In this way, Christian anarcho-capitalists in the natural law tradition, through their understanding of the institution of private property as founded on the non-aggression principle, have recourse to a theory that shows this contradiction is no contradiction at all. Christian anarcho-communitarians, lacking any coherent foundations outside of a direct analysis of Scripture, have a much more difficult issue with which to wrestle.

4. Conclusion

Christian anarcho-communitarians are forced to confront the apparent inconsistency between Christ's commandments in the Sermon on the Mount and His actions during the temple cleansing. This is not an inherent contradiction, but a result of their lack of a theory regarding the nature of property and its proper relation to the individual. Christian anarcho-capitalists, who have incorporated insights from the fields of law, philosophy, and economics, have found a way to reconcile these seemingly opposed actions.

Of course, the Christian anarcho-capitalist position is far from secure. The philosophy of natural law is an ongoing research program, meaning there are unanswered questions and challenges from other schools of thought that are also internally consistent. Nor is Redford's account ironclad. There is ample room for disagreement concerning Redford's interpretations, especially his emphasis on Christ's parables as a justification for the institutions of capitalism. Also not considered here are the proper place of the Acts of the Apostles, Paul's epistles, and the Revelation of St. John within the Christian anarchist tradition. Nevertheless, of the two traditions, Christian anarcho-capitalism at least has a theoretical framework which, due to its foundations in natural law, offers a more coherent account of how a Christian who desires to live according to the commandments of Christ ought to structure his life, and how a society of Christians living

¹³ Another possible reconciliation affirms the consequentialist interpretation of Christ's call for pacifism. Physical retaliation to an unfounded aggression can, conceivably, be justified on the grounds that Christ's message posits an ideal towards which to work, not an inflexible rule which must be accepted unconditionally, although this interpretation is less convincing.

outside of the domain of the State ought to order itself. It is certainly conceivable that a thinker in the Christian anarcho-communitarian tradition will discover and adopt a theoretical framework trumping that of the Christian anarcho-capitalists. However, their current *ad hoc* contentions of worker exploitation, which are inherently founded on a demonstrably false theory of value (their rejection of Marx notwithstanding), are foundationless. As the saying goes, it takes a theory to beat a theory. Until Christian anarcho-communitarians adopt a consistent theoretical framework, theirs is bound to be the less justifiable interpretation.

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