

# Religious Anarchism



Religious Anarchism:  
New Perspectives

Edited by

Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos

**CAMBRIDGE**  
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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Religious Anarchism: New Perspectives, Edited by Alexandre J. M. E. Christoyannopoulos

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## PREFACE

Both religion and anarchism have been increasingly politically active of late, often (though by no means always) behind the same lines and for similar causes. At Genoa or Porto Alegre, behind slogans such as “Stop the War” and “Another World Is Possible,” in response to the environmental catastrophe or to the financial crisis, followers and activists of both religion and anarchism have been criticising orthodoxies and voicing radical alternatives. Both groups have attracted new members, and both have revived the interest of scholars and other observers. Within many academic disciplines—politics, sociology, anthropology, law, theology, philosophy, history, you name it—specialists and commentators on religion and on its relation with politics have been busy observing, reflecting and sharing their conclusions. Many of these academic disciplines have also been enriched by critiques and contributions coming from anarchist thought and practice. In short, both anarchism and politically-engaged religion have been increasingly noticed, analysed, and thought from. Yet despite this, it would seem that the overlap between the two has so far not been blessed by a similar explosion of interest. This lack of interest is even more acute for *religious anarchism*—where it is not just an overlap anymore but where anarchism is rooted in religion—perhaps in part precisely because many find rather uncomfortable approaches to religions which treat them almost as forms of political ideologies, as perspectives on the world that directly inform and enthuse political behaviour.

Indeed, some have argued that religion and anarchism do not really mix, that each stands for the opposite of the other. Religions are hierarchic and manipulative, many have insisted, and anarchism vehemently opposes such oppressive constructions. Besides, anarchists are often committed atheists, others have rejoined, which means that they reject the most basic proposition upon which a religious outlook can be developed. Yet however true both (admittedly here heavily simplified) arguments might be, and despite the prevalence of their proponents, there have also always been advocates of fruitful dialogue between the two, with many even seeing a clear continuity between religion and anarchism. One recent publication on anarchist studies even boldly remarks that “every religion

supports anarchy in religious teachings.”<sup>1</sup> The *a priori* impermeable incompatibility of religion and anarchism, therefore, cannot be taken for granted. The debate is ongoing and will no doubt continue to provide measured and thoughtful contributions.<sup>2</sup> Some of these will inevitably emanate from the here central field of religious anarchism.

This field, it is worth noting, has been around for at least as long as “secular” anarchism, and has produced numerous primary sources in the form of books, articles, pamphlets and the like. The academic literature usually cites Leo Tolstoy as the most famous (sometimes even as the only) Christian anarchist writer, but there are many others, such as Jacques Ellul, Vernard Eller, Dave Andrews or those associated with the *Catholic Worker* movement. There are also anarchists from other religious traditions, although their anarchist credentials are no more frequently the subject of meticulous scholarly analysis than their Christian counterparts’. Even on Christian anarchism—the religious anarchism which, for a number of historical reasons, has generated the most literature in the area—no book-length study covering most of its many thinkers or encapsulating their generic contribution has been published to date. In other words, religious anarchism has been both present and understudied for a while now.

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<sup>1</sup> Lisa Kemmerer, “Anarchy: Foundations in Faith,” in *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy*, ed. Randall Amster, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 200.

<sup>2</sup> I am not aware of a generic, in-depth and exhaustive study on the religion and anarchism debate, but good sources on it do include: “Editorial,” *The Raven: anarchist quarterly* 25 7/1 (1994); George Bradford, “Nature, Flesh, Spirit: Against Christianity,” *The Fifth Estate*, Summer 1984; Jacques Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, trans. George W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991); Ammon Hennacy, “Can a Christian Be an Anarchist?,” in *Patterns of Anarchy: A Collection of Writings on the Anarchist Tradition*, ed. Leonard I. Krimerman and Lewis Perry (Garden City: Anchor, 1966); Bill Kellerman and Bill McCormick, “Anarchy and Christianity: An Exchange,” *The Fifth Estate*, Summer 1984, 22; Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism* (London: Fontana, 1993), chap. 6; George Walford, “Through Religion to Anarchism,” *The Raven: anarchist quarterly* 25 7/1 (1994); Nicolas Walter, “Anarchism and Religion,” *The Raven: anarchist quarterly* 25 7/1 (1994); Colin Ward, “Anarchist Entry for a Theological Dictionary,” *The Raven: anarchist quarterly* 25 7/1 (1994).



That, however, may be changing. For a start, most introductory texts on anarchism already do include sections on religious anarchism.<sup>3</sup> More recent collections of essays on anarchism have also featured chapters on religious anarchism.<sup>4</sup> My doctoral thesis, which weaves together existing threads of Christian anarchist thought, attempts to offer precisely the sort of generic study mentioned above.<sup>5</sup> And of course, there is the present volume, which, while not offering a systematic overview of the various voices in religious anarchism “out there,” does instead gather *new* perspectives—current scholarship—on particular strands of religious anarchism.

This present volume is a proud child of the Anarchist Studies Network, part of the (British) Political Studies Association. More specifically, it is a child of the first ever conference on anarchism organised under the network’s auspices, in Loughborough, in September 2008. For that conference, I set out to convene a stream on “Religious Anarchisms” with the aims of bringing together researchers interested in religious anarchism, providing space for conversations between them and with other anarchists, and sharing ideas and projects for the future. The call for papers reaped more proposals than I had expected, and in the end nine papers were presented over three panels. The topics covered were diverse, the panels well attended, and the audiences clearly engaged by the presentations. The stream, in other words, was a success which defied any initially modest expectations.

To consolidate that success, there was a desire to create a forum for this group of like-minded people to stay connected. This led to the creation of a subgroup within the Anarchist Studies Network, which was named “Academics and Students Interested in Religious Anarchism” because the resulting acronym sounded nice. That group’s web pages and its

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<sup>3</sup> To name but a (random and diverse) few: Ruth Kinna, *Anarchism: A Beginner’s Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005); Peter Kropotkin, *Anarchism* (Encyclopaedia Britannica), available from [http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist\\_Archives/Kropotkin/britanniaanarchy.html](http://dwardmac.pitzer.edu/Anarchist_Archives/Kropotkin/britanniaanarchy.html) (accessed 26 April 2007); Marshall; D. Novak, “The Place of Anarchism in the History of Political Thought,” *The Review of Politics* 20/3 (1958); George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> Randall Amster et al., eds., *Contemporary Anarchist Studies: An Introductory Anthology of Anarchy in the Academy* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Nathan J. Jun and Shane Wahl, eds., *New Perspectives on Anarchism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> That thesis is due to be published, slightly revised, as: *Christian Anarchism: A Political Commentary on the Gospel* (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2010).

corresponding mailing list can be accessed via <http://anarchist-studies-network.org.uk/ASIRA>. The other important product of those panels was this volume.

The book contains all nine of the papers that were presented at the conference, reviewed and improved, but also three further papers from authors who did not make it to that conference. These have been spread over three parts: one on Christian anarchist “pioneers,” the second on Christian anarchist reflections on specific topics, the third on anarchism in other religious traditions.

The first part includes a chapter on Pelagius and another on Abiezer Coppe, two thinkers who predate the anarchist and hence Christian anarchist school(s) of thought by several centuries but whose thought nevertheless leans towards it; and two chapters on the Christian anarchist communities which appeared in Hungary and in the Netherlands when classical anarchism was flourishing, towards the end of the nineteenth century.

The second part explores specific themes around Christian anarchism: the Christian anarchist indifference to the state articulated by Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard; the debate over how to respond to the state in light of perhaps the two most notorious New Testament passages on it (Romans 13 and “Render to Caesar”); the anarchic tendencies at play in the religious practice of Christian Dalits; and the Christian church’s call to resist the concomitant and state-upholding concepts of race and nation.

The third part compiles four chapters on non-Christian religious anarchism: a chapter discussing of the Buddhist-influenced thought of ninth century Daoist Wu Nengzi; another on the impact of Kenneth Rexroth’s integration of Zen Buddhism and anarchism in post-Second World War San Francisco; a chapter making a committed and original plea for what is called an “Anarca-Islamic clinic;” and a chapter reviewing prominent publications in Islamic anarchism and offering a tentative model to classify its (and other religious anarchism’s) varieties.

The book, therefore, does not include a chapter on the more general debate on the compatibility of religion and anarchism. A contribution of this sort was sought, but (unfortunately) did not materialise. Yet by presenting twelve chapters of original scholarship in religious anarchism, this book does add to the debate, if only indirectly, by demonstrating the fruitful potential of the overlaps and continuities between religion and anarchism.

Also missing are contributions on Jewish anarchism, Hindu anarchism, or other religious anarchism. Such contributions would have been most welcome, but (again unfortunately) no-one came forth with proposed

chapters on these topics. In any case, this book certainly makes no claim to be offering an exhaustive coverage of religious anarchism. The aim is rather to bring attention to the area by sharing what fresh scholarship on it could be gathered, and thus to indirectly invite further research in other unexplored sub-fields within religious anarchism.

In closing, I would like to wholeheartedly thank all those without whom this book would not have come together. Top among them are: Alex Prichard, Ruth Kinna, Dave Berry and the whole Loughborough crew which hosted the conference, for their hard work in putting together that timely and great show, and for ensuring its success; the Anarchist Studies Network (and hence the Political Studies Association) for its very existence, for its lively discussions and for its generous support; the team at Cambridge Scholars Publishing (and especially Carol Koulikourdi), for its help and encouragement with this book; and last but far from least, the other twelve contributors to this book, not just for their hard work in producing their contributions, but also for their help, for their friendship, and for politely putting up with my endless requests and abundant emails. It was demanding at times, but it is a real pleasure to be able to present this book to the wider public. I hope that readers will be as interested, provoked and inspired as I was by these twelve new perspectives on religious anarchism.

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*Canterbury, May 2009*

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# INTRODUCTION

PETER MARSHALL

“Neither God nor Master.”<sup>1</sup>  
—Michael Bakunin

“Love, and do what you will.”<sup>2</sup>  
—Augustine

Is religious anarchism a contradiction in terms? Is not anarchy the very opposite of hierarchy which in the original Greek means the “rule of the priests”? Is not an all-powerful God who threatens wayward humanity with terrible punishments necessarily evil? Is not submission or obedience to the authority of God slavish?

Given the close historic link between the church and the state in the West, it is not surprising that the classic anarchist thinkers of the nineteenth century, steeped in the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment, should have generally opposed religion as a heavy fetter holding back the liberation of humanity. For the most part, they shared Marx’s view that religion was the “opium of the people,” offering workers and peasants extravagant fantasies of pie in the sky while sapping their energy to improve things on earth. Like the *philosophes*, they generally held the practices and beliefs of religion to be part of the ignorance and superstition left over from the Dark Ages. Above all, they rejected unquestioning obedience to a supernatural power having ultimate control over their destiny. Man, they concluded, was not made in God’s image, but God in the image of some of the worst aspects of humanity.

They were standing in a long radical tradition in Europe which opposed the authoritarian and hierarchical nature of organised religion. Popular peasant revolts during the Middle Ages attempted to throw off the triple yoke of priest, landlord and magistrate who lived off their backs and

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<sup>1</sup> Anarchist slogan, usually attributed to Michael Bakunin.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, “Seventh Homily on the First Epistle of St John,” in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. H. Browne (Buffalo, N. Y.: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1888), para 8.

who threatened, fined and whipped them into sullen obedience. As capitalism began to develop, the downtrodden and dispossessed further rejected the Protestant ethic which saw success in making money as a sign of divine grace. Many during the French Revolution looked forward to that splendid time when the last priest would be hanged by the entrails of the last aristocrat.

In the nineteenth century, the individualist Max Stirner argued that religion was a “spook” in the mind, a manifestation of our alienation from our true humanity.<sup>3</sup> But amongst the classic anarchist thinkers, it was Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Michael Bakunin who most virulently opposed organised religion, the unholy alliance of church and state, and the notion of an omniscient God. Proudhon, brought up in Catholic France, put it simply: “God is stupidity and cowardice; God is hypocrisy and falsehood; God is tyranny and poverty; God is evil.”<sup>4</sup> Bakunin, a militant atheist like Marx, was no less iconoclastic. In his view, “all religions are cruel; all founded in blood.” As for monotheism, he declared: “The idea of God implies the abdication of human reason and justice; it is the most decisive negation of human liberty, and necessarily ends in the enslavement of mankind, both in theory and practice.” Indeed, turning Voltaire on his head, he argued that “If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him.”<sup>5</sup>

Anarchists after them have not only criticised the church as a hierarchical and authoritarian institution but have condemned its repressive morality. Its concept of sin, they have pointed out, encourage feelings of fear and guilt which can cripple the spontaneous generosity and playfulness of humans. In short, the agents of institutionalised religion have turned the sun-blessed garden of love into a mouldy cemetery of desire.

That is the main thrust of the anarchist case against religion. But have all anarchists agreed? As the wide-ranging, thought-provoking and scholarly essays in this excellent collection demonstrate, religion has in the past been and can still be a source of inspiration for anarchists. Anarchism is not inherently atheistic, denying the existence of God, or even humanist, giving a central place to humanity within nature. Nor is it wedded to any particular metaphysics, religion or even ethics; it is a wide river with many tributaries, currents and eddies. What unites anarchists is

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<sup>3</sup> Max Stirner, *The Ego & Its Own*, trans. Steven T. Byington (1963) (London: Rebel Press, 1982), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *Système des contradictions économiques, ou philosophie de la misère* (1846) (Paris: Rivière, 1923), I, 384.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Mother Earth, 1916), chapter 2.

a common rejection of coercive power and imposed authority and a call for freedom to shape their own lives and realise their full potential.

Within the Christian tradition, there has always been an ambivalent attitude to government and the state. Despite Paul's teaching in Romans 13 and Jesus' famous "Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21) many early Christians saw obedience to God and imitation of the life of Christ as taking precedence over any obligation to worldly powers or temporal authority. In this, they took inspiration from Romans 11:36: "For of him, and through him, and to him, *are* all things."

Early in the fifth century, for example, the British theologian Pelagius denied original sin, emphasised free will and claimed that all human beings can achieve spiritual perfection without external assistance. They could also have their basic needs easily satisfied if it were not for the avarice of the rich. Again, in the twelfth century the Cistercian monk Joachim of Fiore predicted the imminent realisation of the Kingdom of God on earth in which free individuals would live together in loving harmony and ecstatic joy.

In the Middle Ages, there were waves of religious libertarian and millenarian movements inspired by such beliefs in north and central Europe. Most notable were the Brethren of the Free Spirit who emerged in the thirteenth century. These mystical libertarians were antinomians, believing that they could be saved by faith alone and that the bestowal of grace released them from any obligation to moral law. They took literally Augustine's adage: "Love, and do what you will." Many of the revolutionaries in the peasant rebellions which swept through Europe, especially the English Peasants' Revolt in 1381 and the Hussite Revolution in Bohemia in 1419-21, were tinged with these ideas. Peter Chelčický, recognized by Kropotkin as a forerunner of anarchism and much appreciated by Tolstoy, was not only opposed to the "two whales" of the church and state but following the example of Christ turned the other cheek and refused to take up arms. During the Reformation, a loose movement of Anabaptists (who believed in adult baptism) and Spiritualists (who believed God was within) called for the separation of church and state and the building of a New Jerusalem on earth. It was not easy. When the puritanical Anabaptists in Münster in 1534 pooled their resources and tried to create a community based on love they ended up burning books and introducing a draconian new legal code.

The revolutionary and anarchistic tendency within Christianity came to a fore during the upheavals of the English Revolution and civil war in the seventeenth century. The Diggers wished only to obey the "law of

righteousness” and were willing to break the laws of England and to work the land as a common treasury. Gerrard Winstanley spoke on their behalf when he declared: “True freedom lies in the community in spirit and community in the earthly treasury, and this is Christ the true-man-child spread abroad in the creation.”<sup>6</sup> The most extreme antinomians at this time however were the Ranters, lawless and masterless women and men, who believed that since they were in a state of grace, they could commit no sin. They shared their goods and practiced free love. Abiezer Coppe in his marvellous *Fiery Flying Rolls* made clear that since God dwells within “to the pure all things are pure” and “sinne and transgression is finished.”<sup>7</sup>

At the time of the French Revolution, William Blake was an offshoot of this underground religious libertarian tradition. Rejecting the constricting, judgemental and authoritarian Jehovah God of the Old Testament, he saw Jesus as a revolutionary force of love and forgiveness, bringing balm to heal the God-beaten heads of downtrodden humanity. In his view, Jesus not only broke the Ten Commandments but was “all virtue, and acted from impulse, not from rules.” Indeed, for Blake, “The Gospel is Forgiveness of Sins & Has No Moral Precepts.”<sup>8</sup>

William Godwin, a one-time minister, may have been an atheist when he wrote his *Enquiry concerning Political Justice* (1793) but it was by extending the Dissenters’ right to private judgement to the political realm that he reached anarchist conclusions. The kind of voluntary communism he advocated moreover can be traced back to the Calvinist sect of Sandemanians among whom he moved as a teenager. Later in life, he began to talk of a “Great Spirit” which pervaded all nature.

Of the great anarchist thinkers, it was however Tolstoy who was most inspired by Christianity. A radical interpretation of the “Sermon on the Mount,” with its emphasis on love and forgiveness, helped him reject all governments as immoral forms organised violence. Since the “Kingdom of God” is within us and we can all be guided by the divine light of reason, governments are both unnecessary and harmful. Tolstoy died on his way to a monastery. Among the many religious groups influenced by him were the Nazarenes in Hungary and the Christian anarchists in the Netherlands

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<sup>6</sup> Gerrard Winstanley, *A Watch-Word to the City of London* (1649), in *The Law of Freedom and Other Writings*, ed. Christopher Hill (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 128.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Hopton, ed., *Abiezer Coppe: Selected Writings* (London: Aporia Press, 1987), 27.

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings* (Oxford University Press, 1972), 158, 395.



who refused to bear arms and pooled their resources in intentional communities close to the land.

While not strictly speaking anarchist, a stance of indifference to the state, developed philosophically by the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard, was widespread among Christian anarchists who believed like him that the love of God and the imitation of Christ lead to withdrawal from the state. In the twentieth century in the United States, Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy and their fellow Catholic Workers further argued that the law of God overrides all man-made laws and supersedes any obligation to obey governments. As Hennacy put it colourfully, a Christian anarchist is “one who turns the other cheek, overturns the tables of the money-lenders, and who does not need a cop to tell him how to behave.”<sup>9</sup> The French thinker Jacques Ellul equally claimed that Christianity means a rejection of temporal power and argued that a form of non-violent anarchism is the only sensible and moral way forward.

For Christian anarchists, if there be any conflict between God and Caesar, a benevolent God will always take precedence. Love of God and love of one’s neighbours are paramount. It is not a question of Bakunin’s “Neither God nor Master” but rather “No Master apart from God.” While they reject the church as a hierarchical and authoritarian institution, most Christian anarchists see the church in the universal sense of a community of believers as a place for resistance against the nation-state and the racism and inequality it engenders.

Although anarchism as a self-conscious body of ideas and practices was largely a product of the European Enlightenment, many indigenous peoples, from the pygmies in the African rainforest to the Dalits in rural India, have been “anarchic” in their religious practices by worshipping without leaders and institutions. Even the humanist Kropotkin argued that morality among humans had evolved naturally prior to the state and recognised that religion had played an important role in encouraging the practice of mutual aid.

As with Christianity, religious traditions and beliefs throughout the world have had their libertarian movements and have inspired anarchist beliefs. The Judaic God of the Old Testament certainly cast the sinful into hell and called for an eye for an eye, yet the Hasidic mystical tradition which developed within Judaism in the eighteenth century brought out the importance of “loving kindness” (the Hebrew root word of Hasidism). Many Jews have been drawn to anarchism. The libertarian philosopher

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<sup>9</sup> Ammon Hennacy, *Autobiography of a Catholic Anarchist* (New York: Catholic Worker Books, 1954), preface.

Martin Buber, strongly influenced by his anarchist friend Gustav Landauer, also saw the kibbutz movement as one of the possible *Paths to Utopia* (1949). Although it has largely lost its way under the pressure of war, some Jewish anarchists still see the possibility of creating a network of libertarian communes to replace the need for the brute force of government.

Islam of course is a monotheistic religion like Judaism and Christianity whose prophets it recognises. At first sight, and certainly for many in the West, it would seem to be fundamentally authoritarian and violent. But this view is largely based on ignorance and prejudice; historically, Christianity has been no less given to violence and coercion than Islam when linked to temporal powers and misled by political leaders.

The very word “Islam” means “submission” or “surrender” and Islam calls for submission to the teaching of the Koran and surrender to the authority of God. The primary commitment of all Muslims is to obey God and God alone. Yet within Islam, there has been a libertarian tendency. The brotherhood and sisterhood of Muslims go beyond national boundaries and their morality transcends the laws of the state and the dictates of government. While *sharia* has crystallised into a rigid set of laws and rules it was originally a form of ethics for everyday life. There is moreover no institutional hierarchy in Islam and a strong emphasis on the search for consensus (*ijma*) within the community (*umma*).

Among Islamic sects, the Qarâmita, the Ismailis (especially the so-called Assassins) and the Sufis have all had anarchist-leaning groups. The Berbers and the Bedouin lived in a form of tribal anarchy. In the ninth century, the Najdiyya and members of the Kharijites felt that since imams had a tendency to turn into kings and rulers, it was better not to set them up in the first place. From the thirteenth to the sixteenth century, antinomian dervishes, such as the Qalandars and Haydarîs, went their own idiosyncratic way, either rejecting or embracing the world as unruly friends of God. Like Christian anarchists, they refused to obey any master apart from God. The mystical sect of Sufis, who preach universal love and tolerance, are particularly libertarian and egalitarian—so much so that Atatürk, the founder of the modern secular state of Turkey, banned them. Sufism has had a growing influence in the West. The anarchist Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson) in particular has espoused Islam and celebrated its heretics and outcasts.

Unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism has no room for a supreme God in its unruly pantheon of gods and goddesses. At the same time, it stresses the divine nature of the unique individual and encourages personal autonomy. Its ethics can be summed up by the phrase *ahimsa*, meaning

“no harm.” Like all the major religious traditions, it too has had its libertarian movements and thinkers. The religious philosopher Aurobindo Ghose, for example, argued that the ideal of humanity is to be found in the natural association of free individuals outside the constricting and mechanical nation-state. Although brought up as a Brahmin, Gandhi was strongly influenced by Tolstoy’s Christian anarchism. He too considered a form of “enlightened anarchy” to be the highest form of society where “everyone is his own ruler, and . . . there is not political power because there is no State.”<sup>10</sup> He had a profound belief in the power of truth and like Godwin believed that it would ultimately be victorious over error. In the long run there was no need for government in a self-managing and decentralised society based on the village councils. Society would then become a community of communities. The Sarvodaya (“Welfare for All”) movement in India and Sri Lanka continues to apply Gandhian principles of non-violent resistance and the voluntary pooling of land and resources.

In the Far East, modern Daoism has taken on many of the attributes and rituals of a religion but in its original form it was a strongly libertarian philosophical and moral system. The Dao is older than any god and by its very nature escapes concepts and words. The wise person goes with the flow of the Dao. As the *Daodejing*, the most beautiful, oldest and profound libertarian text in the world, puts it: “The world is ruled by letting things take their course. It cannot be ruled by interfering.”<sup>11</sup> The conclusions of the Daoist text *Zhuang Zi* are even more anarchistic: to attempt to govern people with laws and regulations is impossible, “as well as try to wade through the sea, to hew a passage through a river, or make a mosquito fly away with a mountain!”<sup>12</sup> If the natural dispositions of humans are not perverted, there is simply no need for government. Some later Daoists like Wu Nengzi were prepared to accept a degree of governmental rule if not attached or deceived by its usefulness but the early Daoists were undoubtedly forerunners of anarchism when they embraced the universe as a whole, accepted the underlying unity and equality of all things and beings, and advocated letting them go their own beneficial way.

Like Daoism, Buddhism is non-theistic. In its pure form it is more of a system of ethics than a religion. Buddha is not considered divine but as a symbol and living example of the enlightened person. Buddhism does not therefore worship a personal deity or divine being but is concerned with

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<sup>10</sup> Mohandas Gandhi, *Democracy: Real and Deceptive* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1961), 28-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Tao te ching*, trans. Gia-Fu Feng and Jane English (New York: Vintage, 1972), section 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Chuang Tzu*, trans. H. A. Giles (London: Unwin, 1980), 87.

self-development. In self-disciplined freedom, all are equally capable of enlightenment. Although it became institutionalised and sclerotic like other world religions, its original message is deeply libertarian. While recommending the teaching of the wise, as the *Kalama Sutta* makes clear, it encourages free enquiry. Its practice of personal autonomy and self-discipline makes external government superfluous. Combined with Daoism to form Zen, it can have profound nation-shaking and state-transforming implications. And as Gary Snyder and Kenneth Rexroth understood, living the life of Buddha in the East or West does not need the law or the state.

It should by now be clear that religion itself is not inherently authoritarian and hierarchical but that organised religions have an unpleasant tendency to become so. The original message of the great religious teachers to live a simple life, to share the wealth of the earth, to treat each other with love and respect, to tolerate others and to live in peace invariably gets lost as worldly institutions take over. Religious leaders, like their political counterparts, accrue power to themselves, draw up dogmas, and wage war on dissenters in their own ranks and the followers of other religions. They seek protection from temporal rulers, bestowing on them in return a supernatural legitimacy and magical aura. They weave webs of mystery and mystification around naked power; they join the sword with the cross and the crescent. As a result, in nearly all cases organised religions have lost the peaceful and tolerant message of their founding fathers, whether it be Buddha, Jesus or Mohammed.

For these reasons, anarchists, whatever their religious beliefs or lack of them, have questioned and opposed the authority of religious leaders and the rule of priests. They have tried to end the close alliance of church, mosque and temple with government and the state. They have insisted on the freedom of belief as well as the freedom of thought and action.

An increasing number of libertarian socialists and anarchists, including myself, feel that the arguments against the existence of a tyrannical God and the need for hierarchical institutions have been won. At the same time, they are prepared to call themselves “spiritual” in a loose sense. While continuing to oppose organised religion, the hierarchy and domination of the church and mosque, and the imposition of a repressive morality, they recognise that life is sacred, that the cosmos is inherently good, that all is ultimately one. They believe that every created thing is divine. As mystics have always known, to attain “union with God” or to be “at one” with the universe goes beyond all organised religion, temporal laws, governments and states. It involves a transformative experience which breaks down the narrow boundaries of ego, nation and race and connects with all beings and the cosmos as a whole.

We can be spiritual without being a member of an authoritarian sect; religious without joining a hierarchical organisation; moral without obeying religious leaders or laws. We can be at one with God or the universe and at the same time work for the betterment of humanity and the well-being of the earth. We can read sacred texts and listen to the wise and still think, judge and act for ourselves. We can enjoy voluntary poverty, peace, fellowship and forgiveness in the garden of love. In short, we can be deeply spiritual and still profoundly anarchist, one strand enriching and enlarging the other in a widening circle of freedom.

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**PART I:**  
**CHRISTIAN ANARCHIST PIONEERS**

## CHAPTER ONE

# THE PELAGIAN MENTALITY: RADICAL POLITICAL THOUGHT IN FIFTH CENTURY CHRISTIANITY

RICHARD FITCH

*Pelagianism is known, if at all, as an early fifth century Christian heresy. Politically radical forms of Christianity, and their secularised kin, are sometimes accused of being Pelagian in spirit and therefore heretical. Being Pelagian is taken to mean having a naïvely optimistic understanding of human nature. Following from this understanding, forms of political life are invented that are themselves wildly optimistic and thus politically unrealistic. Furthermore it is alleged that these political forms, based on a false concept of human nature, act to oppress the flourishing of real human nature. Such a line of attack has often been used against radical political theologies, anarchism, and socialism. Theologically the supposed naivety that lies at the root of these radical political theologies and philosophies is held not to be innocent, but to be an example of unchristian hubris tainted with satanic pride. However, this understanding of the Pelagian is rooted in Augustine of Hippo's polemical misrepresentation of the teaching of Pelagius. As numerous Pelagian texts have survived there is no scholarly reason to accept prima facie Augustine's misrepresentation. Indeed, when those texts are examined a far more complex, and far less heretical, Pelagianism emerges. Here the most politically radical Pelagian text, the *Epistula de divitiis* or *On Riches*, is examined. Beginning with the sin of avarice a striking political theology is unfolded. With an incipient class analysis, an awareness of the slippery logic of desire, and a sensitivity to the political problem of philosophical method, themes are raised that would not be tackled again with such sophistication until at least the late eighteenth century. In this text, and others, the*



*Pelagian mentality reveals itself to be, within theological parameters, both realistic and radical, and as such, worthy of note by all concerned with political radicalism.*

Get rid of the rich man, and you will not be able to find a poor one. Let no man have more than he really needs, and everyone will have as much as they need, since the few who are rich are the reason for the many who are poor.<sup>1</sup>

—Anonymous, *On Riches*

In and of themselves these words, and the political sentiments they express, are unremarkable. What is certainly remarkable is that they were written between 410 and 415 *A. D.* by a follower of a British Christian thinker—indeed probably the first British thinker whose writings have survived.<sup>2</sup> The thinker's name was Pelagius (c. 360-420 *A. D.*). Today he is known, if at all, as the author of one of the great Christian heresies. Pelagius was accused, most famously by Augustine of Hippo, of teaching that human beings can achieve spiritual perfection without direct divine assistance. He denied this charge and accused his enemies of tolerating immoral behaviour within Christianity by exaggerating the effect of original sin. Pelagius lost the fight. Whenever a political radical is accused of having a naïve concept of human nature, or of designing an ideal polity for angels not humans, then there is an echo of the dispute between Pelagius and Augustine.

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<sup>1</sup> B. R. Rees, *Pelagius: Life and Letters* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1998), 194.

<sup>2</sup> Christopher Kirwan, *Augustine* (London: Routledge, 1989), 8. There is some dispute about whether Pelagius was a Briton or a Breton. His exact birthplace matters little for the purposes of this chapter.

## Pelagius and His Context

Who was Pelagius?<sup>3</sup> If his enemy Jerome is to be believed, he was a fat foolish oaf, a “dog from Albion . . . made heavy by Scottish porridge.”<sup>4</sup> Naturally there are profound difficulties in establishing reliable facts for this period, especially concerning someone who was to become a heresiarch. But we know enough not to fall for one of Jerome’s all too frequent rants.<sup>5</sup> Pelagius was born in the British Isles or Brittany, and received a sophisticated education, perhaps as a lawyer. Sometime in the 380s he began to make his mark in Rome. He became significant as a spiritual adviser to leading Christian families in the city.<sup>6</sup> He fled Rome, as many did, in anticipation of the fall of the city to Alaric and the Visigoths in 410. He thus lost his powerbase and network of political protectors. As he and his followers scattered throughout the Empire, so his ideas were more widely disseminated. This made him the target of those who did not share his theological vision. By 415 he had been formally charged with heresy but acquitted. However, his enemies, chiefly the intellectual titan of the rich and powerful North African Church Augustine of Hippo, persisted.<sup>7</sup> They bypassed the ecclesiastical hierarchy and appealed directly to the Emperor. By 418 Pelagius had been excommunicated and

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<sup>3</sup> The “Life” section of Rees acts as a good basic introduction to Pelagius. Of more recent vintage, and notwithstanding a reservation expressed in this chapter, see Mathijs Lamberigts, “Pelagius and Pelagians,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Early Christian Studies*, eds. Susan Ashbrook Harvey and David G. Hunter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 258-279. For reception history see: C. Garcia-Sanchez, *Pelagius and Christian Initiation: A Study in Historical Theology* (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1978); and Mathijs Lamberigts, “Recent Research into Pelagianism with Particular Emphasis on the Role of Julian of Aeclanum,” *Augustiniana* 52, no. 2 (2002): 175-198. Further relevant literature can be found in the bibliography below.

<sup>4</sup> M. Forthomme Nicholson, “Celtic Theology: Pelagius,” in *An Introduction to Celtic Christianity*, ed. James P. Mackey (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), 388, for the full range of anti-Briton prejudice expressed towards Pelagius.

<sup>5</sup> On Jerome: J. N. D. Kelly, *Jerome: His Life, Writings and Controversies* (London: Duckworth, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Peter Brown, “Pelagius and his Supporters: Aims and Environment,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 19, no.1 (1968): 93-114; and “The Patrons of Pelagius: The Roman Aristocracy between East and West,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 21, no. 1 (1970): 56-72.

<sup>7</sup> On Augustine the standard biography remains Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), but to complement Brown: James J. O’Donnell, *Augustine: A New Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 2005) is too invigorating not to mention.

his ideas condemned as heresy. The Council of Ephesus of 431 provided ecumenical confirmation of this judgement. After 418 Pelagius disappears. He may have returned to his birthplace or sought refuge in the monastic communities of Egypt.

Pelagius was in essence a Christian moralist. He lacked the theological subtlety of an Augustine, and he was not directly active in politics.<sup>8</sup> As indicated Pelagius was taken to hold that salvation was simply a question of human effort not divine grace. Augustine felt that this underestimated the corporate effect of the Fall which meant that all human beings were incapable of goodness on their own, and furthermore that all are always already implicated in Adam's crime, and thus guilty, and therefore share Adam's punishment. For the Pelagian divine justice was a mockery without meaningful human freewill, and thus that Augustine's position mocked God. He held that the Fall was not a crime for which we *all* become guilty through the sexual intercourse of our parents at the moment of procreation, and for which we all punished by being fated to corrupt inadequacy. For him the Fall served as the preeminent example of how easy it is to fall into sinful habits and remain trapped there. But for him this enslavement to sin in this life was not *necessary* because the human, thanks to God's creative power, could choose otherwise. He felt Augustine and others were using original sin as a licence to justify immoral and unchristian behaviour as if Christians simply could not behave better. Pelagius believed that the search for human spiritual perfection in this life was the crux of the Christian life. However, it must be stressed that Pelagius did not think that such a search was easy, or that one should ever think of oneself as perfected.<sup>9</sup> Perfection served rather as a regulative ideal for the Christian life. That it was *the* Christian task, and what it entailed, were for Pelagius to be found in the life and teaching of Jesus.

While Pelagius was not himself a political creature his ideas certainly had political implications, as does any philosophical or theological

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<sup>8</sup> There is a controversial but intriguing theory that British resistance to Roman rule was rooted in Pelagianism. This explains the brief appearance of Pelagius as the young Arthur's teacher and inspiration in the *Director's Cut* of the lumbering 2004 film *King Arthur*. I simply lack the necessary historical competence to adequately assess this theory concerning Late and Post-Roman Britain. It originated with J. N. L. Myres, "Pelagius and the End of Roman Rule in Britain," *Journal of Roman Studies* 50 (1960): 21-36. Gilbert Márkus, "Pelagianism and the 'Common Celtic Church,'" *Innes Review* 56, no. 2 (2005): 165-213, provides a recent sceptical and Augustinian response to ongoing speculation in this area.

<sup>9</sup> Rees, 67.

anthropology. Indeed, Leszek Kolakowski, towards the conclusion of a mild polemic against Pascal and Jansenism, endorsed the bold claim

that the entire history of European millenarian and utopian thinking, from the sixteenth century onwards or even from medieval sources, has depended consciously or not, on the Pelagian mentality, on the refusal to admit that evil cannot be rooted out on earth by human effort . . . According to this view our modernity is fundamentally Pelagian and this includes its Promethean hope for a perfect human city without evil.<sup>10</sup>

It should be noted that Kolakowski is working with the Augustinian conception of Pelagianism as a Promethean and proto-modern mentality.<sup>11</sup> The preliminary reading of a Pelagian text undertaken below hopefully demonstrates that such a conception is a misconception. Yet I still think the substance of the claim concerning its influence is correct. Given this purported influence a greater appreciation of the implicit Pelagian political theology can only enrich, and help reconceptualise, radical thought. The political implications of Pelagian ideas were explored by at least one who followed him.<sup>12</sup> Of him little is known except that he was probably the author of a number of letters known as the *Caspari Corpus*.<sup>13</sup> It is only through the care and tolerance of librarians that one can once again listen to what Peter Brown described as the “distant music” of the social radicalism of early Christianity.<sup>14</sup> One of the Caspari texts is explicitly political as it deals with the social significance of the sin of avarice. But

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<sup>10</sup> Leszek Kolakowski, *God Owes Us Nothing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 183. Kolakowski, a thinker shaped by the Cold War, is convinced of the centrality of the dispute between Augustine and Pelagius for the development of European culture, and it structures his understanding of political radicalism especially in its Marxist form. See also “Can the Devil be Saved?” in *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 75–85.

<sup>11</sup> Pelagianism is often taken as a proto-modernism so that its critique can also function as a critique of modernity. See Michael Hanby, *Augustine and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2003), *passim*, or John Passmore, *The Perfectability of Man* (London: Duckworth, 1970), 94–115.

<sup>12</sup> Recent research shows that the idea of a Pelagian school or movement is probably an overstatement. So “follower” should be minimally understood in the sense of participating in a mentality, a shared attitude or ethos. In the articulation of this ethos Pelagius comes first and the author of *On Riches* builds on his ideas. See Lamberigts, “Recent Research into Pelagianism,” 198.

<sup>13</sup> Robert F. Evans, *Four Letters of Pelagius* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 24–31.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Brown, *Poverty and Leadership in the Later Roman Empire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 2002), 112.

the unpacking of these political implications, and the attendant sketching of a political theology, were not merely logical exercises, as they were undertaken at a moment of profound political turmoil.

What is now taken to be unquestionably orthodox was in the late fourth century still just one option amongst many, and this was especially true in the sphere of political theology. It is only in retrospect that it is Pelagius and not Augustine who appears the obvious heretic. In the early fifth century the marriage of Christianity and Empire was less than a century old. It was a relationship that was both fluid and fragile. The transformation of Christianity into a political institution was very much a work in progress. Indeed, the relationship of the Christian religion to the world as such was in question. In 410 the Empire experienced a profound ideological trauma. Rome was sacked by the barbarian Alaric. Gibbon's words capture something of this shock:

Eleven hundred and sixty-three years after the foundation of Rome, the Imperial city, which had subdued and civilised so considerable a part of mankind, was delivered to the licentious fury of the tribes of Germany and Scythia.<sup>15</sup>

The sack itself was not the problem. Alaric left the city after a few days, and as an Arian Christian he had tried to restrain his troops. The problem was the symbolism. More of Gibbon's eloquence:

This awful catastrophe of Rome filled the astonished empire with grief and terror. So interesting a contrast of greatness and ruin, disposed the fond credulity of the people to deplore, and even to exaggerate, the afflictions of the queen of cities. The clergy, who applied to recent events the lofty metaphors of Oriental prophecy, were sometimes tempted to confound the destruction of the capital, and the dissolution of the globe.<sup>16</sup>

The catastrophe provoked much political soul-searching. What was its cause? Was it the adoption of Christianity by the empire? The event was of profound ideological significance as it threatened emergent Imperio-Christian normative structures. To some in the Church all that had been achieved since Constantine was in peril. But as the old "eternal" order tottered it was also a moment of opportunity for those who sought different forms of political and spiritual order. The most famous response to the catastrophe may have been Augustine's *The City of God against the*

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<sup>15</sup> Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 2 (London: Penguin, 1995), 201.

<sup>16</sup> Gibbon, 207.

*Pagans*.<sup>17</sup> But there were other responses. In his letter *To Demetrias* Pelagius himself asked

Where stood our order of nobility then? Where were the occupiers of the fixed, distinct grades of their hierarchy? Everything was thrown into confusion and disorder by fear, in every home there was lamentation, and terror was spread through all alike. Slave and noble were on the same footing: all saw the same image of death, except that those whose life was more pleasant feared it more.<sup>18</sup>

He was concerned not so much by the sack of Rome but by what the Roman reaction to it revealed of the moral health of the Christian Empire. The trauma exposed the weakness of contingent normative structures, such as those rooted in the existing social hierarchy, while spiritual equality endured. One follower of Pelagius took this analysis further to analyse the interrelation between spiritual equality, sinfulness, and the structures of social normativity.

Sicily appears to have been a hotbed of radical Pelagianism in the years immediately after the sack of Rome. In 415 Hilary of Syracuse wrote a panicky letter to Augustine seeking advice about combating dangerous ideas that were abroad in Sicily at the time.<sup>19</sup> He reported that some local Christians argued

that a rich man who contrives to live rich cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless he sells all he has, and that it cannot do him any good to keep the commandments while keeping his riches.<sup>20</sup>

Augustine gave him much advice in a lengthy response. The teachings on riches that Hilary reports can also be found in the Pelagian letter *On Riches*, hence the conclusion that the letter was either sent to or from this Sicilian Pelagian community. The letter is the most politically radical Pelagian text that survives. Indeed, the inflammatory language of *On Riches* may have prompted the Imperial edict of 30 April 418 whereby

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<sup>17</sup> Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Rees, 69.

<sup>19</sup> See Otto Wermelinger, *Rom und Pelagius: Die theologische Position der römischen Bischöfe im pelagianischen Streit in den Jahren 411-432* (Stuttgart: Anton Hiersemann, 1975), 29ff.

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, *Letters* vol. 3, trans. Sis. Wilfred Parsons SND (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 318. This is letter 156. Augustine's reply is letter 157 (319-354). He defends the possession of riches at 340ff. The best that can be said is that this passage is not one of Augustine's better moments.