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Richard Goode

W ho is this Jesus?" Herod's question captured in Luke 9 is one of most powerful and recurring questions over the last 2,000 years. This is such a significant question because the answer will decide how one orders life. Answering that Jesus is the Christ, the sovereign God incarnate, for example, determines priorities and practices, defines motivations and methods. If Jesus is the Christ, moreover, then his Sermon on the Mount is the most concise distillation of the ethics that ought to constitute and govern our life and thought as disciples. If Jesus is the Christ, his own life is the clearest revelation of how our lives ought to be lived. If Jesus is the Christ, then as disciples we pledge to implement his will on earth, as it is already being implemented in heaven. If Jesus is the Christ, then citizenship in his kingdom negates allegiances and loyalties to any other government. Simply stated, if Jesus is the Christ, as disciples we are obligated to imitate and serve him and him alone. His "politics" are exclusively our politics.

What do we know about Christ's politics? From the gospels, we discern Christ's preferential option for the disinherited.[1] Consider the New Testament's portrait of Christ's conscious decision both to be poor himself (2 Cor 8:9) and to live and work among the disinherited. The whole life and ministry of Christ was centered in an advocacy for the poor. Or as Aloysius Pieris notes, "'poverty' is by far the most comprehensive term to describe the ethos of the Jesus event."[2] Consider the narrative of Christ's advent. Upon hearing the angel's annunciation of Christ, Mary broke out in song: "'He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty'" (Luke 1:52–3). The shepherds attending his birth represent some of the most marginalized persons of the Judean society, yet they are the invited guests. Shortly after his birth, Mary and Joseph fled to Egypt to protect the life of Jesus. This placed Jesus from his birth among the class of displaced refugees.

The depiction of Christ's voluntary poverty continues throughout his life and ministry. The very fact that Jesus was a Galilean is more than interesting geographical trivia. It is "part of a larger picture in which God's saving initiative arises from the bottom side of the social and religious structures and from the periphery of the political sphere." The "Galilean provenance" of Christ's movement "points toward a salvific economy which is subversive."[3] Announcing his ministry in the Nazareth synagogue, Jesus read from Isaiah and proclaimed that God had anointed him to "'bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free'" (Luke 4: 18). Then there is the Sermon on the Mount, "the

constitution of the reign of God in this world." The sermon announces that Jesus privileged "not those at the top of the ladder of 'human progress,' but the victims of human [social, political, and economic] violence."[4] Even the manner of Jesus' death communicates his identification with the poor, for the Romans reserved crucifixion for society's disinherited.[5] In the Roman world of his time, in other words, Jesus was an outcast among a group of aliens. So solidarity with the poor is not merely a "pastoral rule, guide, or perspective for reflecting theologically." A preferential option for the poor, imprisoned, and socially marginalized is more than a good strategy or intellectual position. It is the distinctive Christian vocation.[6] Disciples believe that "the struggle for the poor is a mission entrusted only to those who are or have become poor [like Christ]."[7]

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In Christianity, the disinherited serve both as proxies of Jesus (Matt 25) and as archetypes for discipleship. Recall, for example, how Jesus sent out his disciples in Matthew 10 without power, wealth, or prestige. In contrast to, and in subversion of, the world's normative standards and political strategies, voluntary poverty was so normative for the church that the early church fathers and mothers referred to it as the *patientia*—a kind of patent or a trademark distinguishing Jesus' *ekklesia*.

An important clarification must be made at this juncture. The poverty described here is neither exclusively nor even primarily economic—as if a lack of possessions served as an end in and of itself. Discipleship's poverty certainly includes that element, but the wisdom of voluntary poverty is more appropriately focused on the renunciation of traditional "means" (possessions, positions, and leverage) to control outcomes. It is the refusal to amass force (political, economic, or military) to command, manipulate, and dictate events in one's own advantage or favor—even for what one believes to be "the good." As Ammon Hennacy once reminded a friend, voluntary poverty is synonymous with a more comprehensive nonviolence. "You were born a white man in mid-twentieth century industrial America: you came into the world armed to the teeth with an arsenal of weapons—the weapons of privilege: racial privilege, sexual privilege, economic privilege. You want to be a pacifist? It's not just about giving up guns and knives and clubs and fists and angry words, but giving up the weapons of privilege, and going into the world completely disarmed. Try that!"[8] In imitation of Christ, therefore, poverty is not just about giving up investment portfolios, consumer goods, and assorted creature comforts, but renouncing the arrogance of power and control—wealth and violence being two of the most condescending, dehumanizing forms of arrogance. Poverty means engaging the world with empty hands and serving humanity from positions of utter vulnerability. Owning only the weapons of the Spirit rather than the weapons of class and coercion is Christ's way of recognizing and honoring the innate value of each person.

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Simply stated, our discipleship is a commitment to live as powerless, ostensibly irrelevant slaves. We are slaves of a transient, scorned, and executed convict, and confess with the apostle Paul that we desire to "share in Christ's sufferings and conform to his death." We long for Christ's scandalous identity to overwrite and define our own (Phil 2 and 3, Gal 2). In so doing we are gathered as his *ekklesia*, a community so radically peculiar that it too is scorned—even by marginalized peoples. Jesus' preferential option for the disinherited as the defining ethos of Christianity affects

the answer to the question, *"What political form ought our humility take?"* How ought disciples to act politically if their allegiance is pledged to Christ's kingdom and the logic of his politics?

My recommendation is for Christian anarchism. Now I know what some are thinking. Believe me, I have heard it before. "Anarchism?!?" one colleague scoffed. "What a perfectly absurd idea." Or perhaps my favorite response—this one from a gentleman at a local congregation—"I pity you." In popular parlance, "anarchism" is such an odious, pejorative term that when mentioned, people conjure up images of bloodthirsty assassins, terrorist attacks, street fights with law enforcement officials, and other expressions of social chaos. How could any right-thinking Christian attach such a contemptible concept to the gospel's message of peace, justice, and love?

First, anarchists are not uncritical advocates of social chaos, nor is anarchism a nihilistic movement replacing good, safe, and secure societies with utter lawlessness. Although historically some anarchists used violence to seize public attention, remember that extremists of most every ideology have employed scare tactics. So a simple equation of "anarchism" with "violence" is inaccurate and unhelpful. In fact anarchists offer a constructive message that a mutual, voluntary, egalitarian polity (i.e., structure or system) is inherently better than hierarchically-imposed and coerced order—insofar as anarchism is both more consistent with human nature and more just and equitable in social practice. Granted, governments may extort compliance from their citizens or global neighbors through coercion, which may appear efficient and effective for a time. But long-term peace and justice, anarchists respond, requires voluntary assent by participants who have crafted authentically egalitarian communities. Because the crux of the issue for anarchists is the difference between voluntary and coerced order—and not order per se—anarchists believe legitimate communities are those that citizens voluntarily sustain.[9]

Second, however precise and carefully nuanced the definitions of "anarchism," it must be established that *"Christian"* is the operative term. Secular forms of anarchism presuppose the natural ability of humans to live ethically and morally once the coercive restraints of government are removed.

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As nineteenth-century anarchist Albert Parsons noted, "Whatever is most natural to do will be the easiest and best to do." The lynchpin of Christian anarchism, however, is the belief that only as led and enabled by God's Holy Spirit can humans live the scandalous, counter-intuitive ethic of Jesus (e.g., voluntary poverty). Secular anarchism, moreover, celebrates individual autonomy and natural rights as one's governing authority. Yet Christian anarchism confesses God as the one, exclusive authority in life. Instead of demanding liberty, autonomy, and individual rights, Christian anarchism voluntarily drops such claims to take on the yoke and burden of Jesus. The "God's foolishness" (1 Cor 1:25) becomes the governing principle, ambition, or point of reference for life. The quest to have the mind and heart of Christ makes all "ends" and "means" other than God's irrelevant—or perhaps even better, nonsensical—because Christianity works from an exclusive epistemological privilege.

Christians must answer all their questions, face all their dilemmas and make all their political decisions exclusively within a framework of Jesus' kingdom. Refuse to "engage the world on the world's terms," avers Phil Kenneson.[10] What disciples understand to be real, logical, practical, and/or effective, in other words, is solely defined not by the normative standards of society but by Christianity. Christians are not simultaneously citizens of both Christ's kingdom and some political entity of this world, as if Christians were called to juggle their responsibilities both to Christ and Caesar. In the ekklesia, there is only one normative standard: the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. This is what makes Christianity so anarchical. The *ekklesia* is radically sectarian in its confession of Jesus as the Christ. All other contesting systems—whether they are the politics

(i.e., *archos*) of the nation-state, ideology, or the pursuit of wealth and power—are untranslatable and untenable for Christians. As Tertullian proclaimed, "Athens" provides neither political relevance nor reference for "Jerusalem." Or as the apostle Paul noted in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, the operating systems of the *ekklesia* and the world are incompatible, because what is foolishness to one is the very genius of the other. Thus no creative synthesis is possible between the realities of citizenship in God's kingdom and one's supposed citizenship in a temporal nation-state. Just as the Romans dismissed the early church as atheistic because of Christianity's unwavering monotheism, so should today's Christian appear anarchistic because the world's guiding politics are neither normative nor authoritative.

Establishing the epistemological privilege of the church, or what he has called "metanarrative realism," has been a primary concern of John Milbank. He laments both the church's tendency to borrow from the world its defining, identity-making history and the church's subordination of theology to the canons of social science. Milbank argues for disciples to invert that relationship. "It is theology itself that will have to provide its own account of the final causes at work in human history, on the basis of its own particular, and historically specific faith," he maintains. "The Church is *already*, necessarily, by virtue of its institution, a 'reading' of other societies." The church's stories, therefore, are the right way to discern and learn about the world, not vice versa. The church provides the only lens whereby disciples get a realistic understanding of life and political order. The mission of the church is not to add a dollop of conscience to political philosophy and government practice so that the nation-state pursues its self-interest with a little spiritual sensitivity. The church is not called to serve

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as the chaplain to the powers and principalities of this world. "The mission of the church is to tell again the Christian mythos, pronounce again the Christian logos, and call again for the Christian praxis in a manner that restores their freshness and originality. It must articulate Christian difference in such a fashion as to make it strange." In the church, history must be told from the axiomatic principles of God's kingdom. In the church, the ethic of Jesus frames all ethical deliberations. In the church, all claims to knowledge and understanding are interpreted in light of the "interruption of history by Christ and his bride, the Church." It is "a gigantic claim," Milbank admits, that the church can and should "read, criticize, and say what is going on" from the position that the church is the exemplary form of human community. But this is what it means to be an *altera civitas*. The church is "not just different, but *the* difference from all other cultural systems."[11]

Hopefully it is already clear that Christian anarchism is more constructive than destructive. Christian anarchism is not so much anti-government, as it is effusively pro-*ekklesia*. Christian anarchism celebrates and pursues a way of being Christian that esteems and honors all the God-given potential for living our lives together—for advocating Christ's peace and justice in our world. Christian anarchism is committed to the principle that as truly good news, the gospel confers a unique, creative, living hope for ordering our lives. Next to the incomparable genius of Christ, all other political paradigms are deficient and inferior—unworthy of making claims on our lives. As Stanley Hauerwas has recently written, "For Christians our lives must be determined by our loves, not our hates." That is why Christians cannot define themselves by what they are against. "Whatever and whomever we are against, we are so only because God has given us so much to be for."[12] Far from making the church passive or isolationist, Christian anarchism's understanding of the politics of Jesus calls the church to become passionately and creatively proactive.

The ends for which the church exists is beautifully presented in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, in which we are challenged to "regard no one from a human point of view" (5:16). Instead of enlisting as pawns in the chess

games of nation-states, we are to live like Christ, who is about reconciling the world. Thus, the political end to which the church is called is a ministry of reconciliation. We live and work to bring all people into union with God and one another.

For the *ekklesia*, what are the normative means for achieving the ends of reconciliation? Here I return to the point made at the beginning of the essay. Striving to imitate the humble life and self-donation of Jesus and to honor the tradition of the early church, Christian anarchism has an unyielding commitment to voluntary poverty, an ethos expressed in manifold ways. First, working from the church's epistemological privilege, Christian anarchism rejects as misguided and implausible all definitions of "peace" inconsistent with the biblical term *shalom*. Nation-states contrive definitions of "peace" built on notions of coerced compliance, or "order." Thus governments are commissioned to pursue "peace" through violent intimidation, literally beating the "other" to the point of capitulation and submission. All violent paths to so-called "peace," however, are in fundamental opposition to the life and teachings of Jesus Christ and the larger biblical principle of *shalom*. As Perry Yoder has illustrated, *shalom* is a much richer term than merely "the absence of bloodshed." *Shalom* refers to "things as they ought to be," or relationships consistent with the biblical vision.[13] *Shalom* means each individual—irrespective of race, nationality, class, ideology, or past record of offense—has his or her personal worth recognized and honored as an equal and as a creation of God. *Shalom* means each individual has access to the material goods and services necessary for subsistence and security. *Shalom* means recourse to justice—whether victim or offender—for the restoration of right relationships through non-retributive means. Peace and justice, therefore, are necessarily in a synergistic relationship. If they are ever disassociated, it is a sign that *shalom* is being violated.[14]

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Invariably, when discussing Christian anarchism with students or members of local congregations, people get fixated on my political expressions—or what they perceive to be the lack of expression. I choose, for example, neither to vote nor pledge allegiance to the United States. The focus should remain, I believe, on allowing Christian principles to dictate actions, rather than vice versa. Folk often seem comfortable swallowing rather significant theological camels (i.e., voluntary poverty, epistemological privilege, and the ministry of reconciliation), while straining at random practical gnats (e.g., voting). I find this puzzling, for my non-participatory stance toward the government is but an outgrowth and intentional expression of the core principles. The significant, integral details are found in the reality of the nonviolent, self-annihilating *agape* love of Jesus Christ who lived in solidarity with the disinherited. The ultimate question then becomes, "What kind of political form does that humility take?"

Jesus is the Christ, and his mission was to reconcile humanity to God and to one another. Jesus is the Christ, and he chose the scandal of voluntary poverty (e.g., nonviolence and *shalom*) as his means to effect that reconciliation. So why would Christians profane their confession by privileging and promoting one nation's self-interest? Is the pursuit of this self-interest somehow consistent with the ministry of reconciliation? By design, governments violently pursue and secure national interests and objectives. It is an inescapable fact that nation-states cannot long survive embracing poverty and foreswearing violence. But the scan-

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dal of redemptive suffering is exactly how Christ and his *ekklesia* triumphs and achieves reconciliation.[15] With reconciliation attainable only via the genius of Jesus, why would Christians want to pledge their lives to something so inferior and self-delusional as a government? Governments are wholly incapable of achieving that to which disciples have been called.

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ENDNOTES

1   Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, 1949).
2   Aloysius Pieris, S.J., "To Be Poor as Jesus Was Poor," in *An Asian Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1988), 16.
3   John Driver, "Messianic Evangelization," in *The Transformation of Mission: Biblical, Theological, and Historical Foundations*, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993), 200.
4   Jurgen Moltmann, "Political Theology and the Theology of Liberation," in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 71.
5   Neil Elliott, "The Anti-Imperial Message of the Cross," in *Paul and Empire: Religion and Power in Roman Imperial Society*, ed. Richard A. Horsley, (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1997), 168–69.
6   Gustavo Gutierrez, "Liberation Theology and the Future of the Poor," in *Liberating the Future*, 102–3.
7   Pieris, 23.
8   Utah Philips, "Anarchy," *Year One* 2 (Winter 2002): 9.
9   In an attempt to prove the naivete of the anarchist notion, many have asked for an example of such a system in practice. I must confess that the best example of an anarchist system I know of is the Churches of Christ. The radical local congregational autonomy, rejection of creedal tests, and non-hierarchical polity is a classic expression of anarchism's genius.
10 Philip Kenneson, *Beyond Sectarianism: Re-Imagining Church and World* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 1999).
11 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), 380–88.
12 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 9.
13 Perry B. Yoder, *Shalom: The Bible's Word for Salvation, Justice, and Peace* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1987), 10–23.
14 A discussion of restorative justice would provide a fruitful illustration of the inherent connection of peace and justice. Unfortunately space will not allow such an investigation here, but for more information see Howard Zehr's *Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1995).
15 See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996).