



IN PRAISE OF ANARCHY: Christ's Vision of a Stateless Society

By J.L. Legard



I was in the second year of my Master of Divinity programme at Princeton Theological Seminary when agents of the U.S. state executed Eric Garner and Michael Brown. The murders of these two young black men and the subsequent determination by the state that the killers were in the *right* had ignited a fiery political activism in me and in my fellow students. I remember that it was so fiery that it was a source of warmth while we protested in the bitter cold.

Every consecutive killing thereafter was like throwing a log into a bonfire. I also remember the struggle of trying to conceive of a theology where God and God's Christ could be found in the tragic wake of the age-old practice of state-inflicted violence against black bodies. But most of all, I remember something very startling about the rhetoric employed by activists, myself included: our frameworks for achieving justice presupposed that the state's existence and its claims to authority over our lives were legitimate. Or, at the very least, we assumed the state was a necessary evil through which we could do pragmatic work.

We imagined that more representation in multiple levels of government would be key to our

salvation. "If we have the right people in government, the oppressed would be treated right," we would exclaim.

But let us ask ourselves: What if the global political discourse is so colonised that our imagination of liberating oppressed peoples has been limited to participating in the very systems that oppress people in the first place? In other words, what if we have been conditioned to think that every vision of liberation must include the iteration of a state? Moreover, what if Jesus Christ challenges us to not work with the state, but to subvert it?

The state is illegitimate and unnecessary

I contend that the state - as an entity that claims to possess a monopoly over the use of legitimate coercion (i.e. violence) - is illegitimate and is unnecessary for achieving liberation for the oppressed. Anarchy can replicate every function of the state in a more effective fashion without its coercive elements through a voluntary and cooperative effort. It is within this space that the apocalyptic Christ dares us to imagine liberation not as another iteration of coercive power, but one of anarchy, which rejects the domination and subordination of human beings.

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When I talk about the "state," I'm referring to the general idea of "state-ness" in all its iterations, whether in America, Kenya or Malaysia - an entity that claims to possess a monopoly over the use of legitimate coercion. So, when we say that the state is illegitimate, we mean both its possession of a monopoly over coercion, and its actual use of coercion, are illegitimate.

What are some of the justifications for the state's claim to power, and how can we deconstruct them?

One argument that defends the legitimacy of state power is that individuals in society have voluntarily consented to it. If individuals do not consent to the state, then it is illegitimate. Obviously, very few have consented to the state under which they live. Most people find themselves citizens of whatever country they happen to be born in, so have they actually consented to live under that jurisdiction? To make things worse, many of today's nation-states are the creation of colonial powers, which simply enclosed various ethnic groups into a single territory while splitting others into two or more states.

In order to solve this crucial problem, John Locke, a 17th century political philosopher, invented the concept of "[tacit consent](#)". Locke's argument infers consent from silence; that merely walking on a highway in a country, for example, gives tacit consent to that country's government. This clearly betrays the actual meaning of consent as a deliberate, voluntary act - for something to be consensual there must be the freedom to refuse. With such a misuse of language and logic here, we cannot help but conclude that the state is illegitimate with respect to the individuals who have not voluntarily consented to it.

Another justification for the state may be the nature of humankind and the conditions under which people live. We could argue that the state is necessary to remedy human beings' violent, greedy and self-destructive ways; to ensure the welfare of the poor, the sick, the uneducated, and so on. Let's say the nature of humankind is indeed deplorable. The false reasoning occurs, however, when observations about society's condition are divorced from any culpability of the state. This assumes

that society's condition is in no way a by-product of the state's current influence.

Nevertheless, let's say that humankind is inherently violent, greedy and untrustworthy. The conclusion that the state is the logical remedy for this condition is unfounded because the state's government is comprised of these same inherently violent, greedy, untrustworthy humans. Therefore, giving the state a monopoly over coercion is to centralise and magnify humankind's worse traits (violence, greed, deception, etc.) and to concentrate power in the hands of a few who unleash deadly force, "legitimately", with a claim to moral superiority. As such, oppression is legitimised as a natural consequence of statehood.

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Another argument for the necessity of the state is to establish justice. Locke believed that an impartial system of justice is needed to avoid a vengeful society where everyone has a right to punish. Whether Locke was working from a high or low view of humankind's nature is irrelevant. (The "high view" sees humans as naturally rational beings who are prone to peace and order. The "low view" sees humans as a naturally ignorant bunch who are prone to war and chaos.) If it was a high view, a coercive system would still be unnecessary to deal with matters of justice because such people would not need to be coerced into doing the right thing.

If it was a low view, a coercive system would still be unnecessary for two reasons. First, as mentioned before, the system would be totally comprised of partial members, and an impartial system made up of partial creatures can never be impartial. Ascribing traits to the state that are not found in its human agents appears ludicrous. If humankind is partial and self-interested, the system naturally devolves into the same, no matter the intentions.

Second, if human beings are really an ignorant and violent bunch, wouldn't the injustices perpetuated by the state's "justice system" (since the system is comprised of partial creatures) cause ordinary people to pursue their own private justice in a vengeance system? And if they pursue their own justice because of injustices perpetuated by the state, what is the point of granting the state a monopoly over legitimate coercion in the first place? It appears, then, that a state would be unnecessary.

A final argument for the necessity of the state is social coordination. The argument is that in a land where resources belonging to or affecting the whole of a community are limited, there is a need for coercion to ensure that individuals do not use their liberty to deplete these resources. This argument presupposes that a mutual agreement for a quota is ineffective because one's own integrity has to be weighed against the possibility that others are forsaking the agreement - a situation that does not yield any foreseeable benefit to the individual. Therefore, depletion (a tragedy) occurs. It means that a coercive force is needed to counteract the self-interests of members of the community and to stave off the assured destruction from everyone's greed and duplicity.

The problem with this argument is that it assumes that such a coercive force acts without self-interest. As long as this coercive force is comprised of individuals who live in the community and who each share a particular interest for themselves and for their families to have access to the resources (and not comprised of foreigners who have no vested interest in the resources), it follows then that this coercive force would be a small conglomerate of interests that ultimately have the

authority to dismiss the interests of the general public, or who can be swayed by special interests that go against the interests of the general public. In other words, the state becomes an apparatus by which a particular interest for a particular individual or group is championed with complete legitimacy. (We are familiar with the results of this from government corruption scandals all around the world.) And if the coercive force is not greedy and selfish, but is benevolent and responsible, then why can't this attribute be extended to the individuals that it purports to represent? In other words, if the enforcers can be trusted, why can't the members of the community who are cooperating be trusted?

My view is that the very institution of the state betrays its key institutional goals of liberty, justice, and peace. This vehicle is unnecessary as well as inefficient because while seeking to protect liberty it forces liberty to be relinquished; while seeking peace it goes to war against individuals with its monopoly of coercion; while seeking justice it is only those who are most valuable to the state's interests (i.e. the rich and powerful) who find it. Does much have to be said about the "tragedy of the state" in the twentieth century during which [democide](#) occurred in insane proportions?

The key to all these tragedies is revealed in the fact that the very notion of a coercive hierarchical arrangement is to propose a stratification of human equality across a matrix of domination. The tyrannical propensities of the state are embedded, then, within hierarchical subordination. It is the underlying reason why the enforcers of a quota, located at the top of the hierarchy, can be trusted (with resources, weapons, power, etc.) while the community, at the bottom, is suspect.

Ultimately, we must look beyond the state to arrive at a virtuous condition—to arrive at liberation.

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Anarchy

The word "anarchy" typically conjures up images of fire, savagery, and destruction. In common parlance it is synonymous with chaos, and is antithetical to civilisation. However, this characterisation is probably a legacy of colonial thought, which sought to justify the imposition of rule over indigenous populations who lived in communal settings. Such communities were thought to be savages by European scholars, among other reasons, because they did not form a state—indeed, they were "[stateless societies](#)".

These societies (and there were many in pre-colonial Africa) represent anarchistic precedents in the African continent. How ironic that the imposition of coercive government (read: *colonialism*) carried with it the greatest acts of savagery and destruction against such societies.

The word anarchy originates from the Greek *an* - ("without") - *archy* ("rulers"). It does not mean to be without laws or without government. It simply means a society that lacks the coercive elements of a state. Anarchists do not propose an orderless society, but one where order arises from voluntary cooperation and self-ruling communities. I personally like Bertrand Russell's description of anarchy:

"[It is] the theory which is opposed to every kind of forcible government. It is opposed to the state as the embodiment of the force employed in the government of the community. Such government as anarchism can tolerate must be free government, not merely in the sense that it is that of a majority, but in the sense that it is assented to by all."

Within Russell's description is a critique of the cherished democratic system where the will of the majority is forced upon the minority. Analytically, we know that this arrangement produces oppression; when we look around the globe, minorities in various democratic governments are suffering at the hands of the majority because they lack participation in the decision-making process, and sometimes even lack recognition by their respective institutions of government. Even those who are numerically in the majority are often held hostage by a cabal of private interests that have a monopoly over state power.

I do not pretend that anarchy does not have its valid critiques. And, for the most part, historically, anarchy as a revolutionary concept has been an abysmal [failure](#). Like most philosophies, anarchism lacks a transcendent element by which the population may be energised into action. I believe that the person of Jesus Christ—that apocalyptic prophet—offers a framework from which to imagine such action.

The apocalyptic Christ

When we refer to Jesus as the “apocalyptic Christ” we are, of course, drawing from the contributions of [historical Jesus scholarship](#), which posits that Jesus was an apocalyptic prophet whose message primarily concerned the imminent end of the world (i.e. “age” Grk: *aion*). In historical Jesus scholarship, this message is over and above his message of being the Messiah, which some scholars (for example, Marcus Borg and Robert Funk) assert that he never preached. I call him the apocalyptic Christ instead of the apocalyptic prophet because I believe that his apocalyptic message naturally indicates his Messianic identity.

When Jesus preached, “The time has come...the kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15, NIV), he invited his Jewish audience to imagine salvation through destruction, but this was with nuance.

A prominent number of Jews conceived the coming of the kingdom of God as a time where the Messiah would assume his kingship and destroy the occupational forces of enemy Rome. Jesus was a poor Judean labourer turned itinerant preacher under the rule of Rome. During this time, Rome was in Pax Romana (“Roman Peace”), where the empire enjoyed relative tranquility in the provinces over which it ruled. So, when Jesus says, “the kingdom of God has come near,” it conjured up thoughts of the Messiah about to come and physically cast the yoke of the Roman government from their necks and install his own empire with the same coercive elements as the former. However, as some with even a cursory understanding of Christianity might know, Jesus was quite disappointing to this apocalyptic imagination in that literal sense.

The apocalypticism of Christ was more comprehensive; it not only signaled the destruction of Roman power but it allowed his followers to imagine the breaking down of elite Jewish power as centred at the Temple. We understand that the Temple power network was controlled by the priestly aristocracy who enjoyed excesses by capitulating to Roman influence and power. They used their prestige to oppress the Jews of Judea as well as visiting pilgrims from around the Roman Empire. Where the Temple and its worship of God was supposed to bring the nation together in unity, the Temple power elites found a way to exploit lower class Jews by setting up money-changers (i.e. a capitalist system) in the outer courts of the Temple to which Jesus responded by making a whip of cords and driving them out (John 2).

So, Jesus's message to “repent because the kingdom is near” is violent rhetoric aimed at the destruction of the system in which his Jewish audience was situated both domestically and abroad. It was a challenge to both the Temple priesthood and the kingship of Caesar. Towards the end of his ministry, Jesus's message went from the kingdom of God “*is near*” to the kingdom of God “*is within*”

you” (Luke 17:21). This nuance invites his audience to imagine breaking up these institutions and taking away their centralised power, and not replacing them with a similar coercive system of capitalism and state power, but with a system that is disseminated and entrusted *within* his very audience. This means that the territory and breadth of the kingdom in this new world will not be confined to physical land or be dependent upon resources like in a capitalist framework but will be wholly in the confines of the human being. It means that the kingdom of God is the agency and autonomy of every human being.

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Most scholars would agree that Jesus was executed by the Roman state for being a political threat to Caesar and the Roman Peace. The Scriptures say that while he was on the cross, the Temple curtain, which kept ordinary people from the space where God was dwelling (the Holy of Holies), was torn in half by destructive earthquakes (Matthew 27:51). This description invited early Christian communities to imagine that the execution of Jesus via state power incited God to break the hierarchical barrier separating the masses from God, where God would no longer be centralised and hidden away for the enjoyment of a few elites. This decentralising and disseminating force declares that the powers that be were illegitimate; and, vests the human being, every human being, with a sacred majesty characterised by agency and autonomy. Our bodies become the temple and empire of God and thus the jurisdiction of God. Therefore, no state can legitimately encroach or impose its power upon the sacred—the human being. It is a merging of both flesh and spirit, which elevates the once downtrodden and oppressed into a position of power, not to coerce but to extend the voluntary divine community.

The reimagination

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.” (Acts 2:44-46, NIV).

“All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had.” (Acts 4:32).

The apocalyptic Christ challenges us today to be steadfast with the message against state power and really, all coercive arrangements in whatever forms they appear. His apocalypticism allows us to imagine liberation not as synonymous with installing coercive state power, or even participating within the state, but rejecting coercion altogether as an affront to the sacredness of individual human beings and the rule of God. We may declare not that the kingdom of God is coming, but that it is here right now, and we are free to realise such liberation through building voluntary and cooperative societies just as the early Christians did.

When we think of reimagining this liberation today, we must grapple with what modern institutions, such as schools, banks and hospitals, or even a criminal justice system, might look like in a stateless society. It is important to remember that individual autonomy is at the core of anarchy. Therefore, when we reimagine these social arrangements, we are not limited to just one vision or iteration, but a vision of many because every community would be free to forge its own voluntary system marked by its own unique variation. Hence, for example, there is no one “anarchist school” per se, but

various arrangements in numerous communities where children are free to come and go as they please and are taught in a cooperative, integral fashion such principles as liberty, fraternity, equality, and solidarity.

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There are copious amounts of literature on anarchist [educational systems](#), [economics](#) (e.g. [blockchain technology](#) has the considerable potential of subverting the state), [healthcare](#), and [justice systems](#) (such as restorative justice, private justice, and even Rwanda's *gacaca* courts to some extent) that may help us reimagine an ordered society without the state. In many ways it has already been happening, except that informal arrangements (such as in the *chama/ stoekvel/* informal banking systems that keep many African communities financially afloat) are maligned as inferior to state alternatives. (It is important to reiterate that each community has the right to self-determine the best approach to operating these voluntary institutions.)

Ultimately, the claims of the state to possess legitimate coercion must be denied at every turn. The rhetoric we use should contain the same urgency as Jesus's, where we cast visions of a world in which the coercive power of governments around the globe are doomed to pass away. The apocalyptic Christ allows us to imagine that individuals and communities can be trusted, because God entrusted God's power in our very beings over which no state or person can rule without our consent.

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