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# The Case for African Anarchism Based on Christian Principles

By J.L. Legard



Jesus Christ's vision of an anarchist world was where the state's monopolisation of "legitimate" coercion is countered by communities that forge their own destinies based on principles of agency, autonomy, and cooperation. As I have [previously argued](#), Christ invited early Christians to break hierarchical barriers that stood in the way of their direct relationship with God. He was crucified for his views because they posed a threat to the Temple priesthood and Caesar's rule.

But first, let us explore the meaning of anarchy a bit further. Anarchy, as a descriptive meaning, is the absence of a ruling body with a claim to a *monopoly* (a centralised authority) over *legitimate* coercion. When we observe our current world, we notice ruling bodies called States that have monopolies on coercion, but the legitimacy of such coercion is what is in question. But more importantly, underlying the quest for the legitimacy of the State's monopoly on coercion is another question: Is coercion ever legitimate?

*Anarchy is marked by the absence of a State, but not the absence of coercion.*

To answer the question simply: Yes, coercion is legitimate in certain circumstances. The apocalyptic Christ challenges us to be steadfast with the message against State power and really, all coercive arrangements in whatever forms they appear. Admittedly, this is too simplistic. This discussion is at

the core of the disagreement between various anarchist factions: whether anarchism allows an autonomous individual to consent to a coercive arrangement or whether it calls for the end of all coercive arrangements, leaving individuals no choice but to be in non-coercive ones. I assert the former, which is not a traditional concept of anarchism, I confess. I believe that it is not for me to illegitimately force another autonomous self-agent to follow my ideas or rules.

The predominant reason why coercion can be legitimate is because in a world where an individual has agency and autonomy, such an individual can make the autonomous choice to voluntarily engage in a community where coercion is built into the arrangements (such as taxes, division of resources, ownership over means of production, whether there are private possessions and property, enforced gender roles, punishment, etc.). In other words, such coercion is legitimate when every autonomous individual experiencing the said coercion has consented to those coercive arrangements. To say otherwise is to logically conclude that a force is needed to prevent the iteration of coercive arrangements when chosen by otherwise autonomous individuals, which would obviously contradict the principle of the agency and autonomy of individuals.

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Moreover, it might even be considered coercion when an individual or a group of individuals autonomously choose(s) to *not* engage in a community. This instance of coercion would be legitimate because forcing individuals to engage in a community breaks a fundamental principle of anarchy—individuals are self-agents and autonomous. Therefore, the choice to not engage in a community is legitimate. Coercion based on the rejection of individual agency and autonomy could never be legitimate, then. Hence, it is this notion of coercion that Christ challenges us to be steadfast against. ***Anarchy, therefore, is better defined as the absence of a ruling body that possesses a monopoly on coercion based on the rejection of individual agency and autonomy.***

Another legitimate coercive force is socialisation. Socialization is defined as “the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society.” I define it as the process by which the individual internalises norms and beliefs from various sources, direct and indirect, within society. Indeed, there is an ongoing exchange in the marketplace of ideas from the moment we are brought into the world. Ideas compete against one another for our assent or we sometimes imbibe beliefs without really thinking, like when we observe and imitate our surroundings.

Naturally, socialisation is a tool that could be used for illegitimate ends but it is in and of itself a legitimate coercive force because it is the fundamental way in which human beings realise their agency and autonomy. For example, states most assuredly use socialisation to maintain their hold on power by issuing narratives and beliefs to the populace about the normative nature of their particular system. However, competing narratives and beliefs from anarchists serve to counter such hegemony by socialising individuals to internalise agency and autonomy of the self as norms.



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We see elements of coercion in the stateless societies of pre-colonial Africa that were consistent with the principle of the agency and autonomy of the individual. For example, according to Sam Mbah and I.E. Igariwey, authors of *African Anarchism: The History of a Movement*, the Igbo controlled the affairs of their village community with four institutions: the general assembly of all citizens, the council of elders, the age grades, and the secret societies, as well as with the Umuada, a body of women born in the village or married into it. "It was impossible...to make a decision on an issue that directly affected women or children without the *consent* of the Umuada" (emphasis mine). Furthermore, other issues affecting the community had to be discussed in detail and be resolved with a consensus from all.

Mbah and Igariwey describe pre-colonial African societies as democratic. They wrote:

*"Pre-colonial Africans enjoyed most of the rights that today would fall under the rubric of civil and political rights, such as freedom of association, freedom of movement, and freedom of expression. Basic economic and social rights, like the right to the use of a piece of land, the right to work, and the right to an education, were also common in traditional African societies. And these rights were recognized and protected. 'Adjudication,' if it can be called such, typically consisted of a fair 'hearing' for opposing parties before the entire village or a council from it; the decision reached was respected and usually considered final."*

The principle of the agency and autonomy of the individual, alongside traditional African principles, presents a relevant framework for how the Church should approach political issues and engagement with the State, both in Kenya and abroad. Specifically, the Church's role is to be a force of socialisation in its respective locality, educating its members as well as the general populace about the said principles, but also implementing (living) the principles by engaging with the State in arrangements that maximise the agency and autonomy of the individual while disengaging with the State in arrangements that reject this principle. (Disengagement altogether is also a valid decision.)

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This is, of course, not without its difficulties. First, the Church must recognise difficult political realities when deciding to engage with the State. For instance, the legal systems of America and Africa restrain the advancement of anarchism. "The extant body of laws in both systems is capitalist inspired and is designed to perpetuate the status quo and the state system [while] in most parts of Africa, military dictatorships and civilian autocracies have introduced decrees and statutes that prohibit workers from organizing themselves into unions." Moreover, most jurisdictions outlaw

advocating the overthrow of the state and punish such advocates with death. This is not the Church's role.

Disengagement with the State, though coercive, is not an active violence synonymous with overthrow. So, what does either engagement or disengagement look like to the Church?

Disengagement is complex. It would mean both the withdrawal of participation in any process or disobedience to any rule of law that rejects the agency and autonomy of the individuals involved, and, if it so warrants, the active, cooperative effort to provide a fundamentally consistent alternative to that unprincipled process or rule of law. For example, some anarchist Christians have been known to disengage with the State's tax regime because the monies derived from it fund the State's illegitimate processes and the enforcement of illegitimate laws. These Christians, instead of explicitly disobeying the tax law, disengage by intentionally making less than the taxable rate and supplementing each other's needs in a distributive community. This tactic essentially defunds the illegitimate State and allows them to not participate in the tax regime while simultaneously building an alternative community based on principles of agency, autonomy, and cooperation. Ultimately, the Church's role is to discover many more creative ways to disengage with the State and build a principled, divine community.

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Engagement, on the other hand, looks like participation with processes and laws that are consistent with the principle of the agency and autonomy of the individual. I believe that the State does not have processes or laws that are consistent with the principle of the agency and autonomy of the individual due to its inherently illegitimate nature as an organisation that does not have the express consent of the individuals over whom it exercises authority. However, I believe that insofar as the State pushes for the expansion of human rights and freedoms for minorities in the democratic process, the Church should engage with such efforts, however minimal or redundant they are to its own alternative efforts.

Second, the Church must recognise difficult ideological realities during its socialisation of members and citizens in its respective localities. The educational systems of America and Africa are centres of Western imperialist thinking. African educational systems themselves have, unfortunately, been dominated by colonialist educational dynamics that have left the few who have benefited from it with a tendency to view themselves as elite individuals and caused the philosophical thinking of the population to readily accept European class assumptions. Mbah and Igariwey wrote:

*"Traditional African education, in contrast, emphasized the interdependence of individuals within the community rather than competition between them. It instilled a group social consciousness and fostered an egalitarian spirit; this in turn naturally led to an emphasis on common endeavors and the sharing of the products they generated. On the other hand, colonial education emphasized individualism and made social existence competitive. The communal spirit was supplanted by the concept of the isolated self and greed, materialism, and an unbridled desire for domination."*

It is the Church's role to offer competing narratives and beliefs from traditional African values to counteract such hegemonic thinking. This socialisation of members and citizens is a force for allowing individuals to internalise agency and autonomy of the self as norms and may occur in its regular teaching services, its campaigns, in reading materials, etc.

Some may counter this by saying that the Church itself has a core teaching, namely, Judgment Day, when Christ demands repentance or assigns one to an eternity in hell. Such an argument, however, would be incorrect for several reasons.

First, it is coercive and ultimately legitimises violence against people who do not believe and, as such, would not be a proper framework in which to couch anarchist principles.

Second, every teaching, Christian or not, is coercive since teaching is a kind of socialisation. As discussed, socialisation is a legitimate coercive force. Second, Christ's actual judgment against unbelievers (and believers, cf. Matthew 25ff) is consistent with the principle of the agency and autonomy of individuals for a couple of reasons. Theologically speaking, the Judgment is essentially the official recognition of the parties' decision to not "engage." Some scholars characterise hell as simply the separation from God where individuals who decided not to engage with God in life have essentially chosen to be separate from God after life. Judgment Day is the unfortunate recognition of that autonomous decision.

Moreover, Christ himself has the agency and autonomy not to engage with whomever he chooses. Separation from God would therefore be legitimate coercion. An alternative, yet unorthodox, theological reason is that God has legitimate authority over the universal community, not only because God created us but also because individuals have given God their consent in a pre-existent state. This is not a necessary interpretation for our purposes - Christianity is replete with theological justifications for a variety of things.

Nevertheless, the Church can no longer be silenced and told that it should not involve itself in political issues for the Kingdom of God is politics and the agency and autonomy of every human being is the Kingdom of God.

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