

*Was Jesus an anarchist? No,
Jesus is the Anarchist.*

In Search of Jesus the Anarchist

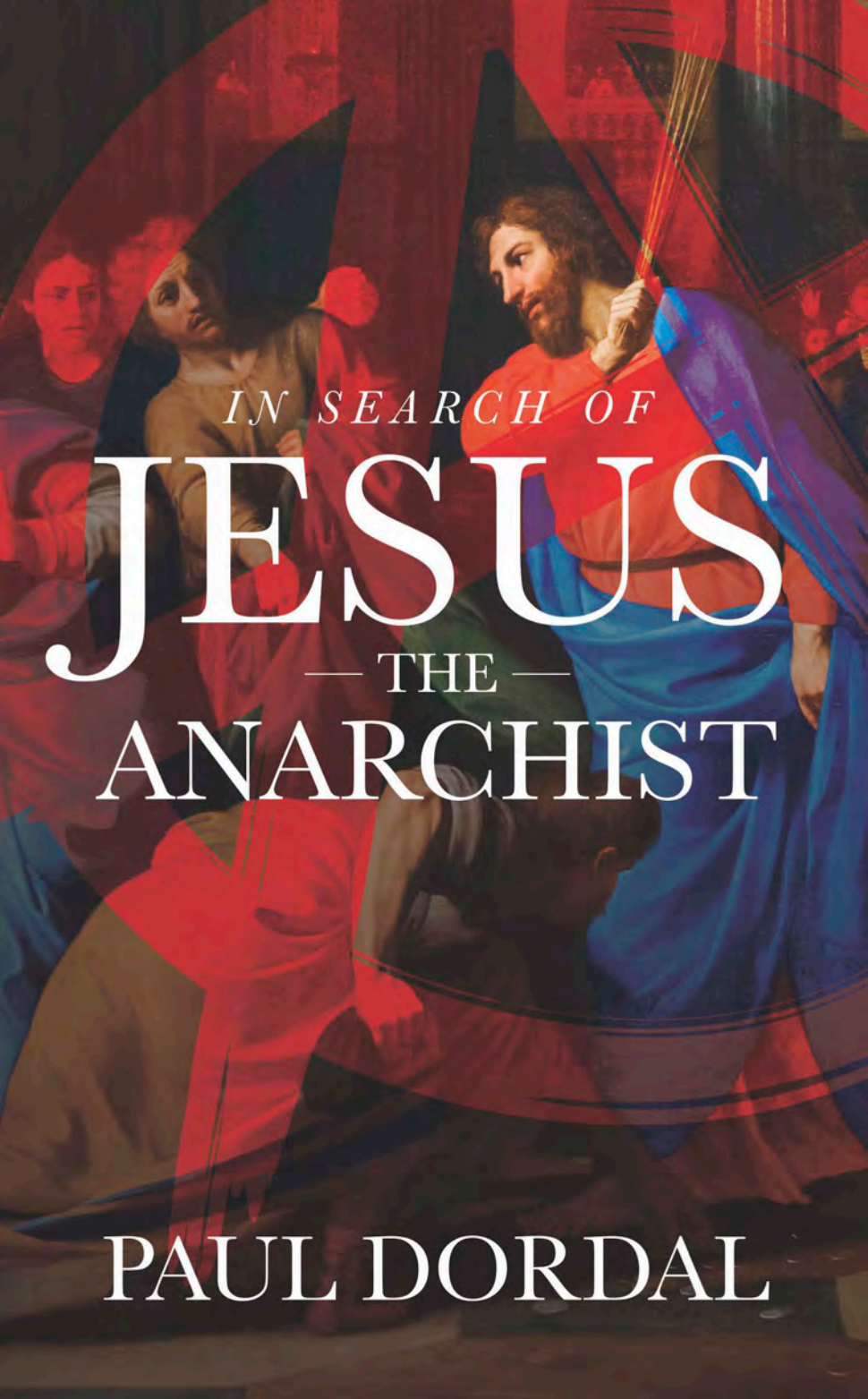
by Paul Dordal

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IN SEARCH OF
JESUS
— THE —
ANARCHIST

PAUL DORDAL

WHAT OTHERS ARE SAYING ABOUT

In Search of Jesus the Anarchist

“Paul Dordal’s book is an authentic and eloquent call for Christian anarchism derived from his own journey to it. Short and yet packed with thoughtful reflections delivered in a friendly structure, it presents the fruits of a maturing process to advocate what he calls a *Commonweal of Love*. Even though his conclusions are unconventional, his tone is ecumenical and respectful. The author clearly means to engage and invite others onto the same search that led him to his carefully articulated conclusions.

“To those not familiar with Christian anarchism, the book will act as both a concise and systematic introduction to it. To those already familiar with it, the book will provide not only another honest account of a journey to Christian anarchism but also a set of refined reflections of its own on the big questions of life, religion, and the evolving political economy.”

Alexandre Christoyannopoulos

Author of *Christian Anarchism* and lecturer at Loughborough University

“Anarchy and Christianity in perfect harmony? Paul Dordal makes the unlikely but compelling case in his book, weaving Scripture with sourced scholars and adding personal narrative to the mix. Standing preconceived notions of both Jesus and anarchism on their heads, he works to clarify and illustrate that the two can and do exist together. If you read the title and did a double take in disbelief, this book is for you.”

Antonio Lodico

Executive director of the Thomas Merton Center

“In his book, Paul Dordal takes us on a journey *In Search of Jesus the Anarchist*. I was delighted to meet all the people Paul introduced me to along the way, who had met Jesus, and were only too happy to share some of the radical, do-able, do-it-yourself ideas they had gotten from him. This book is a travel guide for all those who want to find the Way from the Domination System to the Commonwealth of Love in the world today.”

Dave Andrews

Author of *Christi-Anarchy* and *The Jihad of Jesus*

“Paul Dordal’s book *In Search of Jesus the Anarchist* delivers a very friendly, honest and intelligent assessment of the link between the life of Jesus and the tenets of anarchism. Paul invites us to let go of a fear-based hierarchical society, to take one step at a time toward Jesus the Anarchist, toward our true selves where we can all live together in peace.”

Jessie Medvan

President, Veterans For Peace, Chapter 47

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PAUL DORDAL



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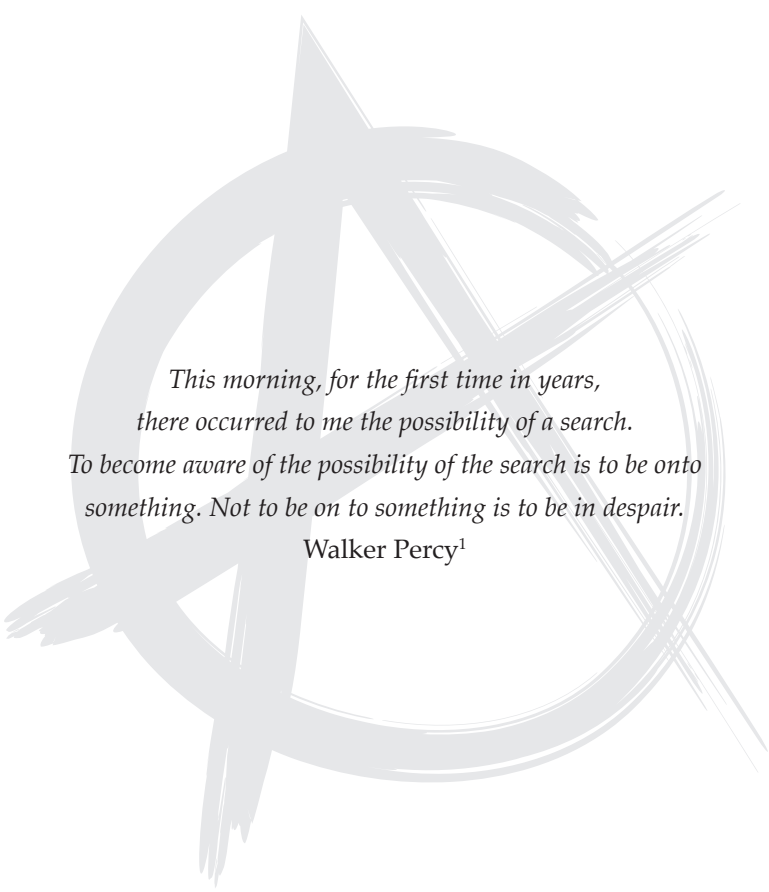
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*This morning, for the first time in years,
there occurred to me the possibility of a search.
To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto
something. Not to be on to something is to be in despair.*

Walker Percy¹

— CHAPTER 1 —

SEARCHING FOR A WAY FORWARD

“THE VIRUS OF POLARIZATION”

When Donald Trump was elected US president in 2016, liberals reacted in various degrees of shock and confusion, and so did conservatives, but for very different reasons. The 2016 presidential election, like so many others in the past, highlighted the remarkably polarized nature of the US population. Yet the election and other recent world events only illustrate further that humanity, and not just the populace of the US, is largely unaware of its propensity toward polarized (or dualistic) thinking. Educator John Dewey said, “Humankind likes to think in terms of extreme opposites. It is given to formulating its beliefs in terms of Either-Or....”² But is polarized and dualistic thinking actually fixed in human nature?

A week after the 2016 US election, Pope Francis opined, “The virus of polarization and animosity permeates our way of thinking, feeling and acting.”³ By using the word virus to

describe polarization, Francis was indicating that the problem of polarization largely spreads by external and oppressive societal forces. But just what are these oppressive societal forces?

The apostle Paul called them “rulers,” “powers,” and “principalities” (Eph 6:12), theologian Walter Pink named them “Domination Systems,”⁴ and political theorist Louis Althusser labeled them “Repressive and Ideological State Apparatuses.”⁵ Though most humans are unaware of what these forces are and how they operate, they include, among others, hierarchical government, mandatory state-sponsored public education, dogmatic religion, capitalist economics, and corporate-controlled media enterprises. Those who lead these systems or apparatuses, knowingly or unwittingly, perpetuate and reinforce harmful dualistic thinking, feeling, and acting in people through their institutions.

So how can we heal from the viruses with which these systems have infected our humanity and our societies? Can we be freed from these tyrannical forces? I believe we can. Yet the only way I can see out of the trap of harmful polarizing and dualistic thinking, to liberate humanity from the stranglehold of these oppressive systems and apparatuses, is to begin a search for a new way of understanding and organizing life—a new way forward.

BEGINNING THE SEARCH

In the novel *Moviegoer* by Walker Percy, the main character, a Korean War veteran and successful stockbroker, comes to the stark realization that he is living a life of quiet despair. Suddenly, though, he wakes up and sees a chance for a search for new meaning and new truth, beyond the Either-Or’s, in Dewey’s language. He says, “What is the nature of the search? you ask.

Really it is very simple.... So simple that it is easily overlooked. The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life."⁶

Sadly the answers to life's most important questions, questions of personal and interpersonal meaning and truth, have proven to be elusive for most humans because they do not undertake a search. The oppressed majority of the world is denied the opportunity to engage such a search, primarily because they are "sunk" spending their entire lives merely trying to survive. Even for those living in the luxury of the West, many abandon the search for truth and meaning during adolescence. Driven by the fear of not being accepted (or non-being), most young people eventually opt to conform to life's simple answers located at the back of the teacher's edition of the public-school textbook or Sunday-school curriculum.

However, if we settle for these pedestrian Either-Or answers, we may find ourselves living on the edge of, or sunk in the midst of, despair and depression. I'll never forget my pastor saying one Sunday morning many years ago, "If we could peer through the roofs of the apartments and houses of our city, we would find the overwhelming masses living in utter despair." I am sure he had Thoreau in mind: "The mass of humanity lead lives of quiet desperation."⁷

Unfortunately after years of being instructed and told by our conformist parents, government schools, dogmatic religions, corporate media, rigid institutions, and other hierarchical authority figures that life's answers were some simplistic formula—an Either-Or choice—most of us chose to accept one of these unsatisfactory answers as gospel truth. Yet we instinctively know there is more than just Either-Or, that there is something

“other.” And when life later becomes difficult, or boredom grows like a weed, or intense suffering comes, those Either-Or cliché answers provide no comfort at all, and despair or depression settles in. And then the questions return.

So, then, what if the answer to life’s most important questions are not Either-Or? Maybe the real truth is what I read in my friend’s college yearbook over thirty years ago: “Today, if you are not confused, then you are just not thinking straight.”⁸ Or maybe it’s found in the wisdom of *The Big Bang Theory* TV show, when Penny’s seemingly dimwitted boyfriend, Zach, said, “That’s what I love about science—there’s no one right answer.”⁹ Could it be that the truth *is* the search—that the truth is in the means, and not one of the polemical ends? Perhaps the key to finding new peace, purpose, and meaning would be to abide in the search—to transcend the tension of the polarities of Either-Or.

TRANSCENDING THE POLARITIES

When we discover the profound truth that so many of life’s polarities (e.g., sacred or secular, failure or success, us or them, light or dark, conservative or liberal, etc.) are simply human constructs reinforced by repressive societal systems, we can cease attempting to choose between the Either-Or’s of life. We can begin a new search to transcend the polarities.

Jesus’s life and ministry clearly demonstrated that he transcended the dualisms and polarities that cause so much angst for many of us. One Bible account especially exemplifies this truth:

A violent storm arose, and the seas were breaking over the boat. But Jesus was sleeping on a pillow undisturbed at the back of the boat. His followers

asked incredulously, “Rabbi, don’t you care if we all drown?” Jesus replied, “You of little faith. Why are you so afraid?” (Mk 4:37-38, Mt 8:26a)

Claiming that the weather was a “violent storm” was a dualistic value ascribed to it by Jesus’s followers. A mile away a farmer might have viewed the rain as a needed blessing. But Jesus saw the weather, and all of life, for what it really is: just the natural order. Jesus did not live trapped in binary and polarized ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Jesus, throughout his ministry, showed us that by faith we too can transcend the seeming polarities of life. Jesus invites us to rest with him in the back of the boat.

MY SEARCH

Searching for meaning and contentment within the tension of some of life’s most perplexing and polarizing questions, I have become aware of perhaps the most confusing human dichotomy: freedom and equality. Specifically I have become conscious of the true freedom I innately desire to fulfill my own destiny, but I am also aware of my corresponding intrinsic responsibility, as a social creature, to be in communion with others. As Jean Vanier once said, we all need “to be someone ... and also to be open to others....”¹⁰

Our common experience reveals that there exists a universal, but paradoxical, human longing for real freedom *and* deep mutuality. We all yearn to be free, but also recognize our need to be in relationship with others who need to be equally free. Finding a way as a society to live peacefully and purposefully within this

conundrum might be best described, also paradoxically, as well-ordered anarchy.

Could it be that believing in the possibility of well-ordered anarchy is what it means to have faith, to trust in the viability of the ideal society that Jesus proclaimed and inaugurated over two thousand years ago?

As I open myself up to seemingly contradictory wisdom, I have been led to search for and practice a more experientially developed faith amidst the many polarities of life. It is through reveling in the beauty of life's paradoxes that I have discovered Jesus as the prototypical anarchist—at the same time both absolutely free, yet also in perfect, loving, and submissive communion with the whole world. My journey, then, has led me to Jesus the Anarchist.

Now, this search for an anarchist understanding of the Christian faith is not a search for a new set of philosophical or theological ideas that might be consonant or dissonant with so-called orthodox Christianity. It is so much more than Either-Or. My process has led to a conversionary realization that being an authentic Christian is to a large degree synonymous with the theory and practice of anarchism. These two worldviews (Christianity and anarchism) are not mutually exclusive as I had been previously taught to believe. In fact I have discovered that they are surprisingly congruent.

Additionally my ongoing "conversion" to Christian anarchism is not just some process of psychological self-improvement. Moving toward Christian anarchism has been the result of realizing and practicing a new way of being, becoming, and acting in the world. Christian anarchists, I have learned, are not isolationists, or armchair philosophers, or ivory

tower theologians. Though some anarchists may be so only philosophically, mere philosophical anarchism is an impossibility for the Christian anarchist—as impossible as it is to be a nominal Christian (Mt 7:22-23). I am, we are, we must be, reflective, radical, and nonviolent activists if we want to understand ourselves as Christian anarchists.

I don't want to promote the nomenclature of "Christian anarchism" as normative or suggest that one should label oneself a Christian anarchist. Christian anarchism is not a new denomination, like Roman Catholicism, United Methodism, or Seventh Day Adventism. Labels such as these polarize and divide people, as well as diminish the freedom that Christ gives in the gospel. Yet for the sake of simplicity, I will use the terms "Christian anarchism" or "Christian anarchist" throughout the book.

CHRISTIAN ANARCHISM: A CHRIST-CENTERED REALITY

Up to this point some of what I have said has sprung out of my personal journey—my search for a way forward. But I have also come to realize the existence of a universal quality to Christian anarchism. I have discerned a fundamental paradoxical truth: being a faithful follower of Jesus is to be and become an anarchist—one who is fully free and in mutualistic relationship with others.

It should be stated now, so as not to mislead the reader, that my apprehending of Jesus as the prototypical anarchist is a Christ-centered reality and not a diminishment of who Jesus was and is. All that the church correctly teaches about Jesus is still valid in this search. And it is not so much that Jesus would have labeled himself an anarchist; the term didn't even exist in his time. But it is for me a real search for the anarchist that is in

Jesus. I am also not suggesting that we must follow the teachings of a mere mortal and thereby be subject to him as simply another slave master or human hero. No, I believe Jesus is the prototypical anarchist because, in his perfectly lived human life, he is in perfect union with Divine Mystery. As the prototypical anarchist he is the model for us all. Systematic theologian Veli-Matti Karkkainen said, "Why is Jesus' earthly life and ministry so important? Because it was a life lived in the way human life is supposed to be lived. It was a life of service, reaching out to others, helping others, finding one's fulfillment in voluntary submission"¹¹ to the will of the Spirit.

Though this book looks primarily at the political and social aspects of Jesus and the gospel, we should be keenly aware of the potential for a serious imbalance if we ignore the very pietistic aspects of Jesus's spirituality. Each follower of Jesus is called to a balanced life, a prayer-filled, deeply mystical, spiritual life with God, integrated with a committed sociopolitical life with others. For me Jesus *is* the spiritual center of an anarchistic theology and practice of Christianity. Jesus's life, ministry, death, and resurrection must be the focus and foundation of a contextual theology and social practice of Christian anarchism. To have it some other way would be to deny too much of the faith's core teachings, so that it would no longer be Christian but some sort of esoteric spiritualism. Jesuit author James Martin said, "The life of Christ is the central metaphor for the Christian life. And the way that Jesus understood who he was, what he was meant to do, and how he was meant to do it, is a metaphor for the Christian journey to the true self."¹²

Therefore living life as a Christian anarchist is modeled on the life and ministry of Jesus. He is the ultimate inspiration

to live free and whole lives in communion with God and others, not only because Jesus is divine, but primarily because he is eminently human. Jesus lived perfectly within the polarities of absolute freedom and deep mutuality, and shows us the way as well. By overcoming the domination systems through his cross and resurrection, Jesus inaugurated an alternative way of living fully free in mutuality with all people. The apostle Paul expressed it this way: "It is for freedom that Jesus set you free.... So use your freedom to humbly serve others in love" (Gal 5:1, 13).

Thus I still celebrate the centrality and inherent paradoxical beauty of the cross and of a Jesus that I discovered early in my Christian journey. I still believe in a loving God as really real, not just some founding myth that I organize my life around. I still choose to "belong" to Christ's church; I am a member of the body of Christ.

Nonetheless, to move forward in faith is to change, to grow, to become our truer and freer selves. This book, then, is about finding out how you and I can experience believing and belonging in the world today as Christian anarchists.

To search for Jesus the Anarchist means to come to grips with belonging primarily to your immediate and extended "world," not necessarily to any nation, nor an ethnicity, nor a race, nor a gender, nor a denomination/faith, etc. It is not that our particular identities or cultures are no longer important, but our focus is becoming like Jesus, eminently and universally human. Additionally, as Christian anarchists, our faith is in a cosmic Jesus, not an ecclesiastical system, and this faith can only be truly lived out on the margins, beyond the suffocating collars and prison-like walls of institutional religion.

At the same time, we should not believe that this kind of search will take us on a divergent path that rejects everything about conventional Christianity. I have found the search to be a means of finding a familiar or perennial path inside the road that leads to true freedom. Could it be that the anarchist path is the narrow road that Jesus spoke about in the Gospels (Mt 7:14)? Could Christian anarchism be the way that we transcend the dualistic and polarizing thinking, feeling, and acting that has enslaved us for so many generations? Could the way forward be the anarchistic way of Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (Jn 14:6)?

Here we will explore the possibility that Jesus was the prototypical anarchist and that his project for a new way of life and society, which I am calling the “Commonweal of Love” (what Jesus referred to as the Kingdom of God or Kingdom of Heaven), is a clarion call for his followers to engage in the development of functioning anarchist societies in the world today.

BECOMING BELOVED ANARCHISTS

This text, then, is for those who wish to become spiritual seekers again, or dynamic mystics if you will; it is for common people openly and courageously searching for God, personal freedom, and interpersonal meaning. It is not simply an exposition of a theory. I am not an academic.¹³ I am an activist, and I want to challenge and activate faith in others. I pray this book will encourage a vibrant dialogue that results in a new praxis. Hopefully reading this controversial volume will stir questions and prompt you; first, to search beyond the polarized, dualistic answers that have proven unhelpful and even harmful for so many. Second, I hope that you will share and discuss with others

where your own search has taken you. And third, it is my sincere wish that you will be motivated to live and act in new ways to follow Jesus more faithfully.

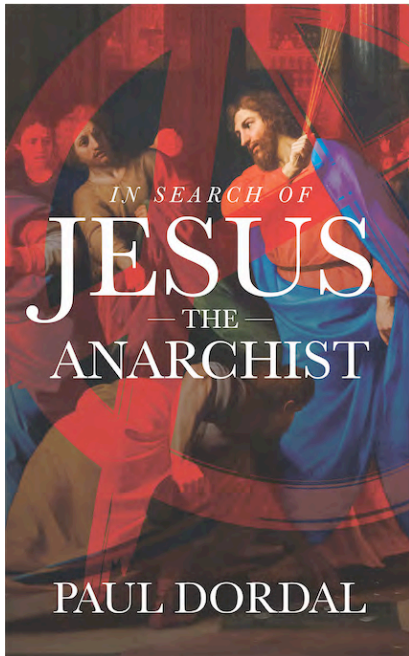
Christian anarchism, in the end, is not so provocative as it is practical. It is, as I will define it in the next chapter, primarily an action-oriented spirituality. It is a movement into a deeper maturation of human development (an *anthroposis*,¹⁴ if you will). It is a lifestyle that might be called a “mystical praxis.” It is about becoming—becoming truly like Jesus “the Beloved” of God (Lk 3:22).

Yes, the goal of the Christian life still remains—transformation into the image of Jesus (2 Cor 3:18), who is the very image of God (Heb 1:3). But this time we will begin to see and live life through the eyes and heart of Jesus the Anarchist. Christian anarchism, then, is based on the eternal truth that the Spirit of God can transform each of us to the point of recapturing the fullness of the *imago Dei*, God’s image, in everyone who is open to becoming.

Thus Christian anarchism may also be understood as the process of being and becoming the beloved of God. The mystic Henri Nouwen said, “From the moment we claim the truth of being the Beloved, we are faced with the call to become who we are. Becoming the Beloved is the great spiritual journey we all have to make.”¹⁵ Inasmuch as we have apprehended and appropriated Jesus as the archetypal self or prototypical human, whom God declares “the Beloved,” and inasmuch as we live out the radical freedom that Jesus possesses as Jesus the Anarchist, the goal of the Christian life—the goal of all humanity, then—is to become fully Christlike anarchists.

Again, this search will lead us to discover that Christian anarchism is not an esoteric spirituality or theology, or just one of many heterodox Christian systems, but possibly the normal understanding of the Christian life for followers of Jesus. It is my hope that Christians of all stripes will come to discover the truth and beauty of anarchism (and anarchists will come to discover the truth and beauty of Jesus), because the future of Christianity will be a mystically held faith, a reflective practice of committed spirituality, and not a dogmatic or ecclesiastical one. Catholic theologian Karl Rahner said, "The devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic,' one who has experienced 'something,' or they will cease to be anything at all."¹⁶

I believe that the devout Christian of the future, if they are to authentically live out the Christ life, will be an anarchist.



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