

Anarchy & Christianity

An Exchange

George Bradford (David Watson)

Bill McCormick

Bill Kellerman

1984

This exchange on christianity, anarchy, spirituality and resistance, follows an earlier one on religion and radicalism which appeared in the Winter 1984 FE ["Symbolic Protest & The Nuclear State," FE #315, Winter, 1984]. Christian anti-war activist Bill Kellerman (foreground in photo above at his arrest at Williams International Corporation, a manufacturer of cruise missile engines in Walled Lake, Michigan), and self-described christian anarchist Bill McCormick, reply to the previous exchange, and FE staffer George Bradford responds on the facing page.

"I am a Christian unapologetically..."

Dear friends at the FE:

I begin this letter in the front seat of my car. Covenant and the Peace Community are across the street praying lenten prayers and examining their consciences (yet again!) at the gates of the cruise missile factory. A deputy sheriff blocks my way with his car and keeps watch over my illegal parking spot. From this standoff I am content to watch the quiet inner drama of my friends and pray to stand with them. At the same time I think of you.

I was gladdened to read in the Winter '84 FE an account of events at Williams International and various reflections on — the blockade. Glad that you all felt drawn there. Glad for the quality of your thought and criticism. Glad because I think the conversation between Christians and anarchists an important one.

I am a Christian—unapologetically. On occasion I have also thought myself an anarchist. It's not that I mistake biblical faith and anarchism to be one and the same (God forbid!). But I do believe that the best in one leads towards the best in the other. In any history of civilization, anarchism and radical Christian pacifism (call them what you like—both repudiate label and ideology) would rate little more than footnotes, but I'll bet they'd appear on the same page. (Here my friends across the street conclude their singing and greet one another with loving hugs. I take up this correspondence later.)

Let me make a confession: the Christian community has been seduced by the state, by ideology, by nuclearism. The church has served the empire by silence and complicity. When we go to the gates of Williams or elsewhere that active complicity is exactly the topic of our self-examination. To repent means precisely to break with that deadly authority.

Let me also quibble: biblical faith is not the foundation of empire. New testament Christianity was born into a people occupied and ruled by the Roman beast. Jesus was executed by the empire for resistance. He was declared the "Dead One" by Ceasar, Pilate, and the local' religious authorities. According to the biblical witness they stamped the imperial seal on the door of his tomb and set a watch of Roman soldiers. But, says our tradition, the seal cracked and

the soldiers fled. Against all odds, the early movement proclaimed him the “Living One” at the risk of imprisonment, torture, and death—all of which they regularly suffered.

(George Bradford overlooks the irony of his joining the state in its judgment and declaration of death, confirming its final solution. The “Dead One,” indeed.)

What proved more effective on the empire’s part was seduction—the so-called “conversion” of Constantine, the establishment of “faith,” the easy idolatrous mimicry of state by church in hierarchy, wealth and power. The Living One was buried again.

So it is that when resistance and noncooperation with the nuclear authorities arises from the margins of the church, it is an irony which does not escape the Christians, and an embarrassment which does not escape the anarchists. I predict that both the irony and the embarrassment will grow because the resistance is growing. And it is growing mainly in the churches. Of those who are in jail around the country for serious and creative actions, the majority far and away are Christians. Something is alive. They are not there in desperation but in hope. They are not crushed by the machine because their inner resources (let’s call them spiritual) run very deep.

Not A Code Word For Ideology.

In a way I was as grateful that George Bradford chose to stand back from the blockade as I was that N. Bates joined us. We think the integrity and coherence (let’s call it spirit) of our action is crucial. We respect other people’s integrity and ask the same. Non-violence training bears on this. It is not a code word for ideological conformity or a pledge of orchestrated submission. (I cringe also when actions become pre-arranged and scripted.) Non violence training is simply the (albeit clumsy) attempt to build community so that people know themselves and one another. In order to act mutually and in common. Nor are we naive about the state’s tactic of disruption by infiltration, violating the common spirit with violence and confusion. Non-violence training attempts to confront that prospect openly.

I do quibble further, however, with George Bradford when he says that our “Lord-worship” prevents him from acting “at least for now.” Say what? We say: act. Grant us our integrity and act on yours. Now. It’s all but too late.

I liked the citations from Camus in N. Bates’ reflections and offer one of my own. After the Second World War Camus addressed some monks in France. His remarks are published as an essay, “The Unbeliever and the Christian,” in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*. There he says:

“What the world expects of Christians is that Christians should speak out loud and clear, and that they should voice their condemnation in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could arise in the heart of the simplest person. That they should get away from abstraction and confront the blood-stained face history has taken on today. The grouping we need is a grouping of people resolved to speak out clearly and pay up personally.”

I am chastened and challenged by that. He is asking the Christians to be Christians. We must get beyond words. Even good ones. We must act and pay up personally.

I ask nothing less of the anarchists. To be honest, I make it, for them, my prayer.

In our common sense,

Bill Kellerman

“The churches (are) capable of change.”

Dear FE friends.

Being raised with a conservative Presbyterian background (against which I rebelled at age 15 to become an atheist and an anarchist), and seeing all the changes that have taken place not just in the Catholic Church but in all the churches in the last ten years, let me put it this way: I would much rather see elderly women’s circles sitting around plotting how to stop the nuclear death train when it comes through their community than praying for the conversion of Russia or some other such nonsense.

Now I am aware that this is far from the case everywhere, but I think that the fact that it has happened as much as it has is in itself a miracle, and due primarily to the efforts of groups like the Catholic Worker and other Christian resistance communities. I would agree that unfortunately there is still a majority of Christians who if not followers of Jerry Falwell and his crowd are even more dangerously lapsed into total apathy and silence on the great moral issues of our time. But I believe the churches capable of change—particularly the Roman Catholic Church, which in a scant twenty years has gone from blessing the bombs and kissing the hand of the military to condemning the Bomb and speaking out against political repression (read Penny Leroux's *Cry of the People*). I may get swallowed up by the system and never be heard from again, but nevertheless, consider the amount of shaking up we could give the system if we had not dozens or hundreds but thousands and thousands of Christians in the streets blocking the entrances to the death factories! (This to me is enough to warm even the most hardened infidel heart.) Why, I believe it would shake the beast that is this country to its very core.

I think one of the greatest things about Dorothy Day was that she managed to maintain the revolutionary fervor of her political youth after she converted to Catholicism, and as a result, along with other people such as Thomas Merton and the Berrigans, managed to reshape and redefine the church from within. Day and Peter Maurin were both influenced by the political anarchists of the last century, particularly Kropotkin. I think the best work written on the movement as a whole is *Breaking Bread* by Mel Piehl. *Loaves and Fishes* by Dorothy Day is good on the early days of the movement, while Ammon Hennacy's *Autobiography of a Catholic Anarchist* is indispensable.

I think I understand the strong anti-work tendency in the modern anarchist movement. As Kurt Vonnegut wrote in *Breakfast Of Champions*, "Seems like the only kind of work an American can get these days is committing suicide in some way." I myself have never really held a steady job within the system, but have either worked part-time or done full-time volunteer work for room, board and a small pittance for the last six years. So I would not consider myself "working" in the sense that it is understood. But as I do value the Catholic Worker philosophy, I do believe there is a certain kind of work that is useful and needs doing, and that is basically to work with the poor, the people who live on the street, the people who fill the prisons, the people who make up the underside of history.

I don't care if one is a Christian, a Buddhist or an atheist, I think this is the kind of work that calls us to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. If we do so, our position is valid; if not, we simply lapse into verbal abstractions—a luxury affordable only to the well-off. Meanwhile, much of the population of the world is struggling simply to stay alive, and it appears to me that those of genuine Christian faith are really trying to do something about it.

Now I am aware that there are reasons why things are the way they are, and that under different conditions we could all be equal and autonomous individuals and none of the paternalistic "works of mercy" stuff would be necessary. But one must start somewhere, that is to say, if someone is lying on your doorstep hungry or freezing to death do you give them a lecture on economics and kindly send them on their way or do you give them something to eat and shelter from the cold? I for one am disgusted with petty political bickering and am willing to make a quantum leap to believing that even miracles are possible again. It appears certain that nothing else is going to work.

My view of the sacred is I think actually more Taoist in its origin than Christian: "the ocean receives the homage of a thousand mountain streams because it manages to stay below them." This theme from the *Tao Te-Ching* is repeated in the Sermon on the Mount: "the first shall be last and the last shall be first," and "for God has chosen the weak of this world to confound the strong."

This message could liberate humankind, but as you have accurately pointed out, more often than not it is used to enslave them. Lamentably, I must agree that every charge you have leveled against Christianity is true; its role in destroying native peoples and their religions, in con-doning and upholding slavery for centuries, in further subjugating women (which seems to be a universal theme in all religions ever since the dawn of patriarchal civilization) as well as helping to perfect the machinations of modern warfare. So where does this leave us? In the soup, I'm afraid. How could anyone be attracted to or inspired to do "good works" by a religion with such a history?

The problem is that we as Europeans have lost our own spiritual tradition when we took on Christianity and perverted it to support world conquest and domination. We are a people without roots. I would love to be a reindeer herder in Samiland sitting around a campfire playing my magic drum and chanting chants. But the drums have all been broken, and the chants forgotten (there were the witch burnings to deal with all of that).

So I would agree that perhaps in our situation Christianity is not the most theologically pure choice to make. But my main quarrel is not with the Christ but with those who forge his name. My problem is not with the core of Christ's teaching (which is the essence of all true religion, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "The Kingdom of God is within you") but rather with the massive system of bureaucracy and deceit that has grown up around it. So it is my opinion that in the unfortunate situation we find ourselves as 20th Century Euro-Americans immersed in the culture of Christianity, the only way out is by way of the very same tortuous path that we have come, and that means total purification through practice of the very same religion that brought us here. For it is only by our actions that they will know us; words alone matter very little.

Consequently I tend to spend a lot of time these days immersed in such trivial and reactionary pursuits as prayer and contemplation, thinking about things like God and miracles. It seems to me that there is nothing else left to do. Everyone who tries to fight the powers of this world on their own level sooner or later ends up being possessed by them. It is only a matter of time after each successful revolution before the old slaves have set up a new tyranny on the ruins of the old.

So I have decided to become a silly fool and abandon my fate to God, and in the meantime practice Christianity to the very best of my ability, and that means taking what Christ said very seriously. I certainly don't pretend to understand all the intricacies of the paradox yet—meanwhile, I'm still a wild-eyed anarchist trying to throw a monkey-wrench into the works.

Bill McCormick
The Open Door Community
Atlanta, Georgia

Nature, Flesh, Spirit: Against Christianity

George Bradford responds

A friend recently asked: why are you criticizing christians who represent the religion at its best? Why criticize people who are sheltering refugees fleeing from the death squads, blockading weapons factories, pouring blood at the entrances of the military installations? Why question those who perhaps represent the original impulse of the cult, rather than the "massive system of bureaucracy and deceit" as one correspondent puts it, which the church has become?

First of all, being reasonable people, they might listen, so my remarks were aimed at them. Secondly, I find the christian emphasis the anti-nuclear movement is taking troublesome. While it is true that many sincere people are driven by the logic of their own christian commitment to commit acts of symbolic protest against the war machine (which is all to the good), the underlying message to it all seems not to be the struggle against the war machine, but the importance of religion. The christians oppose the nuclear weapons because total destruction is a sin; but all kinds of activity is considered sinful, and I resist mixing the notion of sin into such an important question. Finally, the underlying causes of the nuclear threat demand a thorough critique of modern technological civilization, a critique which must necessarily look at christianity, which is a central code of this civilization; I think it more honest and more fruitful to look at it from its best manifestations rather than to take potshots at its most obvious hypocrisies and contradictions.

I certainly am not questioning or criticizing the integrity of people like Bill Kellerman and Bill McCormick. And far from any sense of embarrassment regarding their actions or those of other radical christians, I feel a strong sense of solidarity with them for their acts. But despite my admiration and respect for the commitment and courage of the individuals who face persecution and arrest (and worse) in their struggle, I think it appropriate to consider the origins of the state and the civilization which they resist—a civilization and a state steeped in christian tradition, symbolism and response.

Exile from Nature and the Body

Mixed up in all this, I realize, is the problem of discourse and language. In a sense it is absurd to “argue” with people who are acting out of deep faith; the word “god” evokes from them a different response than from me. For them “the lord” represents a kind of freedom and plenitude, for me an impoverishment. The religion which gives them sustenance strikes me as one of the most demonic forces ever to emerge from the chaos.

I am not interested in the rationalist dogmas from which most anarchists derive their ideas on the sacred. A notion of the sacred is important to me, but I find little in christian traditions which is consonant with the sacred traditions which draw me, those of primal peoples. On the contrary, I find a devastating exile from nature and the body in christianity, a corrosive and agonizing dualism which obliterates the ambivalence and diversity enhanced by primitive spiritual outlooks. In fact, it is christianity which has brought us to where we are today; so I doubt that it will do any good in solving our problems.

I find it curious that both McCormick and Kellerman use the pragmatic argument that it is in fact christianity which is moving people to act against the nuclear state. Using the very same instrumental argument, isn't it equally true that religion is presently moving masses of people to engage in all kinds of acts, from suicide attacks in the Iran-Iraq War to praying in front of churches where the image of the Virgin Mary has been seen? And hasn't the vast majority of christians been moved not to radical social action but to passivity by the message of the gospels?

After all, the hope that most christians share that their god will finally set things aright undermines the very work of radical christians. When they blockade the gates in the name of their powerful god (rather than in the name of our unique mortality which has no need of grand generalizations), the nuclear threat, seems obscured (not to mention the underlying causes of war and technological destruction) and the evangelical message remains. But the evangelical message puts the resolution of the problem in the hands of god, not human beings. (Actually, if the all-powerful god they imagine existed, this world would stand either as an indictment of his sadism or proof of his impotence.)

For most people in the christian world, hope in “god's plan” makes resistance to the nuclear state and the business-as-usual pointless—the practice of isolated acts of charity and kindness suffice while one waits for the final day of judgment. That is why McCormick won't see the thousands of christians in the street that he envisions in his letter. The underlying signal of ‘real-existing christianity, contrary to wishful thinking, is not that of rebellion and noncompliance with Ceasar, but with submission and obedience. Everyone tells us to pray for peace—and since only miracles can save us, prayer becomes the response to oppression.

I understand that these good people aren't simply praying, and I admire them for their acts of conscience when they shelter refugees, feed and clothe the dispossessed, and blockade the “satanic mills.” But they are only the marginal counter-tradition. Christianity must be judged not by the sporadic beauty of the gospels, nor by the anarchic radical christians from the Ranters to the Catholic Worker communities, but by the impact of the institution as a whole. Christianity allows room for those on its margins because it is a vast phenomenon, a whole civilization, but its main thrust is as a conservatizing and corrupt force, an imperial satrapy, a secret society pushing spiritual drudgery and repression. The pinnacles of the church institutions are cesspools of vampires. For every rebel they accidentally turn out, they produce a legion of crippled, obedient slaves. “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers,” we are told in Romans, 13:1–3. “For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil...” (Even Dorothy Day promised to close down the Catholic Worker if so commanded by the church hierarchs, a promise they never took her up on.)

The Very Engine of History

Both correspondents admit that Christianity has become distorted, while denying any relationship between its origins and the later distortions. “Biblical faith,” writes Kellerman, “is not the foundation of empire.” And he goes on to observe the revolutionary character of the cult and its persecution by the imperial Roman authorities.

But the biblical faith of the “people of the Book” is indeed imperial. It was the biblical faith of the Jews which made it possible for them to deny the sacred character of other spiritual traditions—the truth was to be found in the scriptures, the rest was idolatry. The Christians continued this exclusionary and combative tradition with a vengeance; the scribal, formulaic tradition of the Pharisees (who were among the earliest converts to the cult) was applied to the gospels, and all new revelations were denied. All the truths were said to be contained in the Book, making this spiritual view contrary to primal traditions, in which the vision is constantly renewed by new ecstatic visions. For the Christians, such a continual circle dance was considered heresy.

From this point on the Christians turned on the other mythic cults, declaring them blasphemous idolators. The revolutionary movement to which Kellerman refers became institutionalized, coming to resemble the Leviathan it opposed. The anti-imperial martyrs were slowly replaced by politicians, and the cult became an organization, and finally a state and an empire. This is the dialectic of revolution and history. As Fredy Perlman says in *Against His-story, Against Leviathan*,

“The resistance has come to power, but its first aim is to liquidate the resistance.”

So when your god-man arose as your tradition states, I see emerging from the tomb not a regenerative spirit as the evangel states, but an organization, in the form of an armored emperor, a Constantine, at the head of a heavily armed legion of conquerors. His chief propagandist, Paul, a Pharisee and a former agent of the empire, who, once converted, declares war on wilderness and the flesh, declares war on the mythic circle and announces a bleak pilgrimage into civilized time. “The Christian West,” writes Frederick Turner in *Beyond Geography*, “had to live onward, set its face resolutely forward in the hope of recovering in an apocalyptic future what it had once had in the past. The historical interpretation of Christian mythology thus became the very engine of history.”

Who can fail to see that we are now living out the consequences of that rupture with nature and myth? “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” says the Judaic abstraction on their banners, and the violence against all the “false gods” has never ceased. “I came not to send peace, but a sword,” says their Elusive One. First, war is declared on the nature spirits, on all the other incarnations of mythic regeneration, Dionysus and Tammuz, Adonis, Mithra and Osiris. The sacred groves of the pagans are cut down, and Demeter is killed, her fertile fields sown with salt.

The body itself becomes a place of battle; just as humanity has been exiled from nature, the flesh and spirit are torn apart. These unhappy orphans worship a dead and fleshless god. “For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace.” (Romans 8: 5–6) The entire history of Christian civilization testifies poignantly to the destructive and neurotic character of this reversal of terms and fear of death.

Wherever the flesh and spirit were one—among the savages and pagans who would become the victims of this mechanism—the sword brought by their god was used. “And when the Lord thy God shall deliver them before thee; thou shalt smite them, and utterly destroy them; thou shalt make no covenant with them, nor shew mercy unto them...But thus shall ye deal with them; ye shall destroy their altars, and break down their images, and cut down their groves, and burn their graven images with fire.” (Deuteronomy 7: 2, 5)

Marching Zionward

And so unfolded the long wanderings through the wilderness, the torching of the villages, the capture of slaves, the burning of witches and shamans; thus was initiated the world’s most extensive and powerful empire, first spreading to the peripheries of Europe and Asia, then to all the other continents. The saintly warriors of the desert set out on their conquests to bring the entire world into their dead realm. They installed their clocks in every tower to proclaim the triumph of Time; they charted every “barren” land and divided it among themselves for Commerce. This was not the ideal of Christianity, but its real, material manifestation. “We are poor travelers,” Cotton Mather would write in mosaic fashion from a land where the sacred resided in every stone, animal, stream and dance, “in a world which is as well the Devil’s Field...a world in which every Nook thereof, the Devil is encamped with Bands of robbers to pester all that have their faces looking Zionward.”

Marching Zionward, exterminating the wilderness, the Christian refugees reduced the luxuriant, sweet smelling Tree of Life to a barren cross, the milk of the Great Mother to a gall-soaked rag at the end of a spear,

Paradise to a sterile burning plain. They reduced the ecstasies of the sacred circle dance to a thin gruel of sin, guilt and retribution, turning abundance into sacrifice, fleshly desire into denial and bodily affliction.

Now we have reached that Zion, and the malignant propaganda of their god blares from loudspeakers, the heathens (some of them counter-tradition christians themselves) are put to the torch and the sacred groves are flattened with Agent Orange. If a few christians in this christian world find a contrary message in the ambiguities of their dogma, what can that mean in the face of the total trajectory of the civilization, what can that mean in the face of the monstrous technobureaucratic machine which is the final outcome of christian hatred for nature and fear of death and life? Yes, there is irony in such a turn of events, but can a christianity with a human face really undo what christian civilization has come to mean?

The Drums Have All Been Broken

Bill McCormick argues that we have no choice but to turn to that very christianity, that dirge which is the only music left to us, since “the drums have all been broken,” and we have lost our shamanistic and nature-based traditions. Apart from the fact that christianity can no longer be described as solely a European religion, isn’t it obvious that wherever the drums have been broken, it has been done by the christians?

Rather than living within the terms of that discourse which is the drama of our spiritual impoverishment, I think the moment propitious to fashion new drums. And the process takes place in a way that can link us to a more primitive pattern in the mythic cycle, by destroying the old oppressive gods along with their world. As Joseph Campbell noted in his classic work on comparative mythology, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, “A god outgrown becomes immediately a life-destroying demon. The form has to be broken and the energies released.”

The Jesus of the christians has long been such a demon, has become history, and history has become the state, and the state a megamachine which holds us captive and devours us before its mystical-technological altar. Whatever the positive energies contained within the counter-traditions of christianity, as a whole it has served to crush and despiritualize deeper traditions that it is now time to rediscover—primal traditions which with luck will help us to cast down this flesh-denying god once and for all.

Your Jesus said, “He that is not with me is against me.” I take this challenge seriously. In the present world—where the sacred is automatically associated with repressive religions and a pathetic occultism which is only a variant of that which it claims to oppose—a widespread social response to an earth-based notion of the sacred appears rather unlikely. An unrelentingly (and unapologetically) primitivist nostalgia for the Garden is not assimilable to this world, as your Christian prayers are. After all, the signals of your religion are already everywhere, they dominate the present discourse, and what I am describing remains either marginalized among scattered primal peoples or only a remote potentiality among the captives of modern civilization.

But the irresistible longing to cast off the repressive restraints of this civilization, the necessity for ecstasy and for reconciliation of flesh and spirit, humanity and nature, all lie just below the surface waiting to burst forth like a volcano from a corn field. And when that volcano erupts, its lava will cover all the churches. “We are prisoners of war while we are waiting here,” said Black Elk. “But there is another world.”

fifth Estate

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