

The Subversive Spirituality Of Christi-Anarchy.

A Survey of Radical Biblical Politics - as incarnated in Jesus and interpreted by Paul.

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“Even when they call us mad, we know we only preach the subversive witness of the Beatitudes, which have turned everything upside down” —Oscar Romero

In my view the Judeo-Christian Perspective is neither *absolute*, nor *relative*, but *directive*. It is not absolute - in the sense that it is the same message in different times and places. It clearly changes in relation to circumstances. But that does not mean that it is relative - in the sense that it is a different message in different times and places. The changes are more like improvisations on the same themes rather than different themes. There is a progression in the development of the central themes of the bible over time, and, I would suggest, it is the direction of that progressive revelation that provides a critical dimension for our deliberations.

At one stage in human history we were commanded to take 'eye for an eye' and at another stage in human history we were commanded to 'turn the other cheek'. These commands are obviously not absolutely the same. There is a significant difference between taking an 'eye for an eye' and 'turning the other cheek'. But I believe the intent behind both of these different commands was the same - and that was to limit the level of retaliation taken in a world caught up in relentless cycles of revenge. Those who take an 'eye for an eye' are no more likely to slaughter the innocent than those who opt to 'turn the other cheek'. But, we cannot simply choose the biblical statement we prefer to rationalize our actions, because the call to take an 'eye for an eye' has been superseded by the call to 'turn the other cheek'. We were called to move from unlimited violence to limited violence by the command to only take an 'eye for an eye'. And we were called to move on from violence to non-violence by the command to 'turn the other cheek'. The direction of this revelation - from unlimited violence to limited violence - and, then, from violence to non-violence - is crucial for considering prospective actions.

When we are considering *subversive spirituality* there are a number of texts in the Judeo-Christian tradition that can inform our discussion.

In Egypt the Israelites endured nearly four centuries of oppression. During that time, as far as we know, the people didn't see any sign of liberation on the horizon. Then, one day, God comes across Moses. God knows Moses is the man for the job. He is the kind of man who will act; but, having been chastened by painful experience, is the kind of man who will act carefully. So God approaches Moses to ask him to help him intervene. And Exodus is the story of their struggle to liberate the Israelites from slavery in Egypt

1.1 "Let My People Go!"

Exod.3:1 Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. 3 So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up."

⁴When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!" And Moses said, "Here I am." ⁵"Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." ⁶Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

⁷The LORD said, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering. ⁸So I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey..."

¹⁰So now, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt."

^{7:1}Then the LORD said to Moses, " I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron will be your prophet. ²You are to say everything I command you, and your brother Aaron is to tell Pharaoh to let the Israelites go out of his country. ³But ... ⁴he will not listen to you. Then I will lay my hand on Egypt and with mighty acts of judgment I will bring out the Israelites. ⁵And the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out my hand against Egypt and bring the Israelites out of it."

⁶ (And so ...) Moses and Aaron did just as the LORD commanded them.

Note: God loves everybody equally, but has a particular concern for the oppressed. God's concern for the oppressed expresses itself in a call to action. And, in this particular situation, the call to action involves God's people participating, body and soul, in a bloody struggle for total liberation.

The Exodus story is a very powerful paradigm for oppressed people to use in responding to their oppression. But we must take care in interpreting it. Is the Exodus story a paradigm for praxis? A strategy for those who suffer oppression - to seize the day and liberate themselves right here and now? Or is the Exodus story a paradigm for hope? A solace for those who suffer oppression for hundreds of years - that one day their liberation will come?

It is important to note that, in the original story, God guides the struggle!

Right from the beginning the organization of Israel as a nation was in stark contrast with the nation of Egypt that had enslaved them. They not only left Egypt's "pyramids of stone" behind; but also left Egypt's "pyramids of state" behind them. They sought to be a "holy nation" - "not like the other nations". They decided to have no "king", but the "King of Glory." Instead of a central government, they decided to have a decentralized federation of tribes. And disputes that arose were adjudicated by a series of judges.

1.2 "The Lord is King!"

Psa24:7Lift up your heads, you gates; that the King of glory may come in.

⁸Who is this King of glory? The LORD strong and mighty.

29:10(He) sits enthroned over the flood; **the LORD is enthroned as King.**

¹¹The LORD gives strength to his people; he blesses his people with peace.

**146:3 Do not put your trust in princes, in mortal men, who cannot save.
4 Their spirits depart, they return to the ground; their plans come to nothing.**

5 Blessed is he whose help is (in) God, 6 the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea, and everything in them-- the LORD, who remains faithful forever.

**7 He upholds the cause of the oppressed, gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, 8 the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, he loves the righteous.
9 The LORD watches over aliens and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.
10 The LORD reigns forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations.**

Until the day the people decided they wanted to have a king of their own.

"We want a king!"

Jud 21:25 **In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit in his own eyes.**

1 Sam. 8:4 **So all the elders of Israel gathered together** and came to Samuel at Ramah. 5 They said to him, "You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; **now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.**"

6 But when they said, "Give us a king to lead us," this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the LORD. 7 And the LORD told him: **"Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. 8 As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. 9 Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do."**

10 Samuel told all the words of the LORD to the people who were asking him for a king. 11 He said, **"This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. 12 Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. 13 He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. 14 He will take the best of your fields and vine-yards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. 15 He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. 16 Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. 17 He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. 18 When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day."**

19 But the people refused to listen to Samuel. "No!" they said. "We want a king over us. 20 Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles."

21When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the LORD. **22The LORD answered, "Listen to them and give them a king."**

Note: After the people of Israel were liberated, they set up a free society. A society that was built on the foundation of "trust", rather than "security". But when it came to the crunch, they abandoned the "politics of trust" and embraced the "politics of security". Opting for a monarchy, just "like all the other nations", though they knew, full well, their king would enslave them.

It's interesting to note God's response to the demand for a king. He knows that it represents a clear rejection of his political agenda. He says, sadly, "They have rejected me as their king". He is implacably opposed to a top-down, centralized, political economy that disempowers people, especially the people at the bottom of society. And he warns the people of Israel not to go back to the form of government that they left behind them in Egypt, lest they "become slaves". But the people say they want a king regardless. And in a move that shows God is passionately committed to democracy - as opposed to autocracy - he instructs his representative to recognize the right of the people to decide on the form of government they want - and "give them a king" - even though he disagrees with the decision himself.

God accepts his rejection, but longs for a day when things will be different.

1.3 "A New Covenant."

Jer31:31**"The time is coming,"** declares the LORD, **"when I will make a new covenant** with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.

32It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

33"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD.

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

34No longer will anyone teach their sibling, or their neighbor, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD.

Note: God longs for a day when he will be able to re-establish his kingdom on earth. A kingdom characterised by acceptance, respect, and reciprocity. Where the rules are no longer external, but internal, 'written on people's hearts' and everyone, 'from the least to the greatest' (note the order), has access to power.

Generation after generation reject God's agenda for love and justice. And generation after generation continue to construct political economies that enrich a powerful minority at the expense of the majority of the population.

Till, one day, God steps onto the stage of human history, in the person of Jesus Christ, to show us the way that we can live with love for justice once again. Jesus not only *tells* us about "the Way"; Jesus *is* "the Way" himself.

When the people try to make Jesus their king - he refuses, saying, he has not come "to be served", but "to serve", and to give his life as "a ransom" -the price he is willing

to pay - to set the people free. He says that, while pagans may "lord it over" one another, it should "never be so among you".

1.4 "Not so with you!"

Mat23:8"**You are not to be called `Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers and sisters.** ⁹And do not call anyone on earth `father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰Nor are you to be called `teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ. **¹¹The greatest among you will be your servant.** ¹²For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Matt20:20Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

²¹"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

²²"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

²³Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

²⁴When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

²⁵Jesus called them together and said, "**You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷and whoever wants to be first must be your slave- ²⁸just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**"

Note: There are two ways of understanding power. Traditionally our dominant notion of power has been defined as *the ability to control other people*. The dominant notion of power emphasises the possibility of *bringing about change through coercion* – an approach that tries to make others change according to our agendas. While the traditional dominant notion of power means *taking control of our lives by taking control of others*, Jesus advocated a radical alternative to the dominant notion of power – *taking control of our lives, not by taking control of others, but by taking control of ourselves*. This alternative emphasises *bringing change by conversion* – an approach that does not try to make others change, but tries to change ourselves, individually and collectively, in the light of a glorious agenda for justice. It breaks the control that others have over us and liberates us from our desire to control others.

The dominant notion of power is popular because it often brings quick, dramatic results. But the dominant approach to power is characterised by short-term gains for some, and long-term losses for everyone else. Every violent revolution there has ever been, has - sooner or later - betrayed the people in whose name it fought its bloody war of liberation. The alternative notion of power is unpopular because it is usually a slow, unspectacular process.

But the alternative approach to power is the only way for groups to transcend their selfishness, resolve their conflicts, and manage their affairs in a way that does justice to everyone.

The essential problem in any situation of injustice is - that one human being is exercising control over another and exploiting the relationship of dominance. The solution to the problem is not simply to reverse roles, in the hope that once the roles have been reversed, the manipulation will discontinue. The solution is for people to stop trying to control each other. All of us, to one degree or another, exploit the opportunity if we have control over another person's life. Common sense therefore dictates that the solution to the problem of exploitation cannot be through the dominant approach to power - with its emphasis on controlling others. The solution is in the alternative - the strong but gentle approach - which emphasises controlling ourselves, individually and collectively, through self managed processes and structures.

Some of us sincerely believe that if we are to help people, particularly the oppressed, we need to manage their affairs for them. But it doesn't matter how we try to rationalise it, controlling others always empowers us and disempowers those we seek to help. The only way people can be helped, particularly the oppressed, is for them to be empowered to take control over their own lives. This is why Christ explicitly forbade his followers taking control over others, no matter how dire the circumstances. Their job was not to seek control, but to enable others to take control over their own lives. (Matthew 20:25-28) It is a pity that many of us who claim to follow Christ have not followed his advice and disobeyed ecclesial and civil authorities who have asked us to do otherwise. We could have been saved the crusades and the inquisition.

1.5 "Nonviolence And Self-Control."

Gal5:22 **"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³nonviolence and self-control. Against such things there is no law."**

Note: It is a great irony to me that the greatest example we have in modern times of someone who did act on Christ's advice, did not claim to be a Christian. We need a lot more people who will experiment with the nonviolent revolution of *swaraj* or self-rule, like Gandhi

It's interesting to note that Christ and his disciples used organic images to describe how the 'power of the Spirit' - the secret of *swaraj* or self-rule - actually operates in our lives. Self-management is described as the 'fruit of the Spirit'. (Galatians 5:22) The capacity to manage ourselves develops quite unobtrusively - indeed, as quietly as fruit growing on a tree. The capacity to manage ourselves may develop unobtrusively, but is far more significant than we might ordinarily imagine. Like a minute seed, so small we can scarcely see it, that seems like it could never amount to anything great, the 'power of the Spirit' seems embarrassingly insignificant to begin with, yet grows into a capacity that is of tremendous significance in the end. (Matthew 13:31-32) The capacity to control our own lives does not develop without opposition, but like a plant growing in the midst of weeds, 'the power of the Spirit' grows strong in an environment that could easily destroy it. (Matthew 13:24-30) How the seeds of transformation, that bear the 'fruit of the Spirit', grow in a community always was, and always will be, a mystery. (Mark 4:26-29) However, it is no secret that the seeds of transformation that bear the 'fruit of the Spirit' will not grow in a community if those of us, whose lives constitute those seeds, do not bury ourselves in the life of our

community. 'Unless a seed falls into the ground and dies it produces nothing, but if it dies it will produce much fruit, that brings much life to others.' (John 12:24)

1.6 "We must obey God rather than mere mortals!"

Acts 4:18 "Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. ¹⁹But Peter and John replied, '**Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God's sight to obey you rather than God.** ²⁰For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.'"

Acts 5:29 "Peter and the other apostles replied: '**We must obey God rather than mere mortals!**'"

Note: Peter and John wanted to cooperate with the authorities. But on occasion they felt they simply could not, in good conscience, comply with what the authorities were asking them to do. They felt morally obliged to obey God, rather than mere mortals.

1.7 "The things that are not nullify the things that are!"

1 Cor.1:26 "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But **God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.** ²⁸**He chose the lowly things of this world --and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are,"**

Note: Before he was converted, during his days as a Pharisee, the Apostle Paul -known as Saul - was certainly well-known as a staunch arch-conservative, who would vigorously resist any radical change to his religious tradition. In Philippians (3:5-6) Paul said that he was 'circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless: as for zeal, persecuting (anyone who tried to bring radical change in the name of Jesus).'

In fact, the first time we meet Paul in the Bible, he is supervising the stoning of the Stephen (Acts 8:1) - whom the apostles saw as a 'gracious' man, 'full of the Holy Spirit', (6: 5) - but whom Saul, the 'Pharisee', saw as a dangerous 'blasphemer' who needed to be publicly executed as soon as possible (6:11).

However, on the Road to Damascus, Paul was personally confronted by the 'once-dead-now-risen' revolutionary Jesus, who pointed out to him that to oppress people working for Christ-like change was to oppress Christ himself. 'As he neared Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting," he replied. (Acts 9:3-5)

And for Saul, that realization meant that everything had to change! So he and his friends took their whole world to task, and set out to reshape it, bit-by-bit, according to the upside-down inside-out values of Jesus Christ of Nazareth. To the great consternation of the key stakeholders in the status quo, Paul and his co-conspirators were 'able to do immeasurably more' than one might have imagined they would have

(Eph 3:20). They chose the *“things that are not”* - to nullify *“the things that are”*.’ (1 Cor. 1:26-28). And time and time again they helped *‘foolish’* people confuse the *‘wise’* and *‘weak’* people confound the *‘strong’* (1 Cor. 1:26) in their quest to develop *radically inclusive and egalitarian communities of faith* in the midst of an established religious tradition which had previously disenfranchised them. They succeeded to such an extent that one horrified observer is recorded as saying - *‘these people have turned the whole world upside down!’* (Acts 17:6)

1.8 The biblical themes that emerge we need to consider in our discussion are:

1. *God loves everybody equally, but has a particular concern for the oppressed. God's concern for the oppressed expresses itself in a call to action. And this may involve God's people participating in a bloody struggle for total liberation.*
2. *God is passionately committed to democracy - as opposed to autocracy – and instructs his representatives to recognize the right of the people to decide on the form of government they want even if he disagrees with the decision.*
3. *God wants a form of government where the rules are no longer external, but internal, 'written on people's hearts' and where everyone - 'from the least to the greatest' - (note the significance of the order) - has access to power.*
4. *While the authorities advocate taking control of others, Jesus advocates taking control of ourselves. Jesus told his disciples not to take control over others. Their job was to enable others to take control over their own lives*
5. *The role of the Spirit is not to overpower people, but to empower people. Responsible self-management is described as the 'fruit of the Spirit'. And, the scripture says, 'against responsible self-management there is no law!'*
6. *We should seek to cooperate with other people as much as possible, but when it comes to the crunch we must obey God rather than mere mortals.*
7. *Even if it means we have to turn our ecclesial and civil world upside down!*