

CHRISTIAN ANARCHY
Jesus' Primacy over the Powers



Vernard Eller

Chapter 12: Book Review of *Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers*, Vernard Eller

I did this book review several years ago. Vernard Eller explains in the book that he was inspired to write it in light of Jacques Ellul's¹ *Anarchy and Christianity*.²

Walter Wink³ did a whole trilogy on biblical "Powers" language. In particular, the last book, *Engaging the Powers*, aligns with and extends Ellul's and Eller's theses.

Inarguable is the thesis that the Judeo-Christian Tradition points to Jesus' primacy over the Powers. In Christian Church history, perhaps the greatest betrayal of Jesus is its being in bed with the Powers.

The great historic Church Traditions — Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism — are all variously tainted by — at times awash in — this infidelity, as is much of Protestantism. (For one example only: the King/Queen of England is still head of the Anglican Church. . . Titular today, but historically, despots.)

That is why books like Ellul's, Eller's, and Wink's are always sorely needed.

An excellent journal dedicated to this understanding is: *The Kenarchy Journal*.⁴ Its origin is explained thus:

The collaboration that is *The Kenarchy Journal* presents the research of academics and activists engaged in the politics of love. The Journal exists to advance applied academic research, and is published in partnership with the *Jim Forest Institute for Religion, Peace and Justice*⁵ as the Institute's academic journal.

Kenarchy is a newly constructed word signifying an innovative, inclusive reconfiguration of Jesus' politics of love. It is derived from *ken(osis)*: emptying out sovereign power and replacing it with a love measured by readiness to die for the other, even one's enemy, and *archy*: a way of ordering or relating in social space. It has been articulated over the last 15 years by a growing network of theologians and activists around original work begun with and on behalf of them by political theologian **Roger Haydon Mitchell**.⁶ While based unapologetically in the Jesus story as

¹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Ellul, accessed August 20, 2024.

² Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*. It was originally published in French in 1991. Ellul explains:

If I rule out violent anarchism, there remains pacifist, antinationalist, anticapitalist, moral, and antidemocratic anarchism (i.e. that which is hostile to the falsified democracy of bourgeois states). There remains the anarchism which acts by means of persuasion, by the creation of small groups and networks, denouncing falsehood and oppression, aiming at a true overturning of authorities of all kinds as people at the bottom speak and organize themselves. (Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity*, 13 – 14.)

³ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Walter_Wink, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁴ See: <https://kenarchy.org/>, accessed August 23, 2024. The founding Editors/researchers are Roger & Sue Mitchell, who explain about it:

While kenarchy is a gift for everybody, those of us who configure the politics of love in these terms are strongly motivated to do so in a way that deeply penetrates existing socially constructed mind-sets. This is why we combine applied academic research and writing together with grassroots social, economic and political activism. *Kenarchy* developed initially as a form of political theology and we make no apology for that, but it now embraces a wide and interdisciplinary perspective relevant to the politics and theology of love. The purpose of this Journal is to advance the applied research, and as such, it is an academic journal.

⁵ See: <https://www.jfi.ssu.ca/>, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁶ See: Mitchell, *Kenarchy Journal*.

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found in the four gospels of the Christian scriptures, and drawing on the theology of trinity and incarnation, it configures an inclusive politics of love as a gift to people of all faiths and none. We enthusiastically invite researchers and activists in the politics of love from other backgrounds to engage with us from their own perspective.

There is more below about the *Journal*.

Vernard Eller⁷ is a Church of the Brethren (U.S.) theologian, author of a score of books, and — like Tertullian⁸ — never dull! He writes in a lively, offhanded manner that is not remotely “stuffy.”

He has written a book entitled: *Christian Anarchy: Jesus’ Primacy over the Powers*, which for him is a kind of capstone to what he had been wrestling with for many years in some of his other writings. He says he finally knows a name for what he has been for years through studying the Bible: a *Christian anarchist*, and he argues that anarchy is the only consistent biblical political option for God’s people.

The book is dedicated to Jacques Ellul,⁹ who wrote a piece several years ago, which recently appeared in English translation in *Jesus and Marx*, entitled “Anarchism and Christianity.”¹⁰

In it, Ellul, a brilliant 20th-century, internationally respected, French sociologist and theologian, writes:

. . . the only Christian political position consistent with revelation is the negation of power: total refusal of its existence, a fundamental questioning of it, no matter what form it may take.

But for Ellul, this does not mean non-engagement in the sociopolitical realities of our society. Rather, he says,

. . . as Christians we must participate in the political world and the world of action, but in order to deny them, to oppose them by our conscious, well-founded refusal.¹¹

Eller comments that:

. . . Ellul demonstrates decisively that a particular version of ‘anarchism’ . . . is the sociopolitical stance of the entire Bible in general and the New Testament in particular. . .¹²

Eller anglicizes the Greek term *arché*¹³ into “*arky*,” then defines it biblically thus:

⁷ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vernard_Eller, accessed August 20, 2024.

⁸ See: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tertullian>, accessed August 23, 2024.

⁹ See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jacques_Ellul, accessed August 20, 2024.

¹⁰ As mentioned, the fairly new British periodical — *The Kenarchy Journal* — had this paper in Volume 2, (also, re-edited, and Chapter 3 of this book): “Restorative Justice: *Peacemaking Not Warmaking*; Transformative Justice: *Penal Abolitionism Not Prison Reform*.”

Mitchell introduces “*kenarchy*” in four works:

1) *The Fall of the Church*; 2) *Discovering Kenarchy: Contemporary Resources for the Politics of Love*; 3) *Church, Gospel, and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West*; (4. *Cultivating New Post-Secular Political Space*.

Finally, please also see: Ellul, *Anarchy and Christianity* — a brief book-length study.

¹¹ both quotes from Ellul, *Jesus and Marx*, 172 & 173.

¹² Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 5.

¹³ *arché*: beginning, origin

Original Word: ἀρχή, ἤς, ἡ

Part of Speech: Noun, Feminine

Transliteration: *arché*

Phonetic Spelling: *ar-khay*

Definition: beginning, origin

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. . . (that which is determined to govern human actions and events) is a good synonym — as long as we are clear that political *arkys* are far from being the only ‘governments’ around. . .

‘Anarchy’ (*unarkyness*), it follows, is simply the state of being unimpressed with, disinterested in, skeptical of, nonchalant toward, and uninfluenced by the highfalutin’ claims of any and all *arkys*. And ‘Christian Anarchy’ — the special topic of this book — is a Christianly motivated ‘*unarkyness*.’

Precisely because Jesus is *THE ARKY*, the Prime of Creation, the Principal of All Good, the Prince of Peace and Everything Else, Christians dare never grant a human *arky* the primacy it claims for itself. Precisely because God is the Lord of History we dare never grant that it is in the outcome of the human *arky* contest that the determination of history lies.¹⁴

He distinguishes this sharply from secular anarchy, which ever revolves around the autonomous Self. He says:

For Christian anarchists, then, the goal of anarchy is ‘theonomy’¹⁵ — the rule, the ordering, the *arky* of God.¹⁶

This means, bluntly, that no power, no government, no “*arky*” is ever legitimate — only God’s rule. For . . .

Human beings just aren’t morally capable of controlling *arky* power and making it work to beneficial ends. Power corrupts. . .¹⁷

Eller traces this kind of “anarchy” from the early church period until the era of Constantine in the fourth century, at which point, as he put it, church leadership simply switched the headings, declaring all pagans to be Christians in one fell swoop of mass infant baptisms. As a result. . .

The church became the Biggest Arky of All, graciously taking unto itself every evil the empire had ever represented. It sacrificed all understanding and appreciation of its God-given anarchy in its zeal to make the world good and do good for it. It lost the beautiful anarchy of its house-churches of human beings to build cathedrals of politicians. . .

It lost the anarchical refusal of military service to mount armies bearing the banner of the cross and in this sign conquering. It lost its anarchical Jesus whose kingdom was not of this world to paint for itself an icon that needed a label before you could tell whether it was a picture of Christ or the Emperor (a sad, sad confusion). It lost its “holiness” in bestowing that title upon

Usage: (a) rule (kingly or magisterial), (b) plural: in a quasi-personal sense, almost: rulers, magistrates, (c) beginning. (Strong, *New Strong’s*).

¹⁴ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 1 - 2; emphasis added.

¹⁵ Not remotely however to be confused with Reformed “Christian Reconstructionism” as described in *Wikipedia’s* article on “Theonomy” (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theonomy>, accessed August 23, 2024).” We read of the goals of such “Reconstructionism”:

Various theonomic authors have stated such goals as “the universal development of Biblical theocratic republics,”^{[11]:223–335} exclusion of non-Christians from voting and citizenship,^{[12]:87} and the application of Biblical law by the state.^{[13]:346–47} Under such a system of biblical law, homosexual acts,^{[14]:212} adultery, witchcraft, and blasphemy^{[15]:118} would be punishable by death. Propagation of idolatry or “false religions” would be illegal^[16] and could also be punished by the death penalty.^{[17][18]}“

My response?: *Yikes!*

¹⁶ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 3.

¹⁷ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 21. Please see on “power corrupts”:

Acton, “Transcript of Letter.” The famous quote goes:

Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. (See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Dalberg-Acton,_1st_Baron_Acton, accessed August 20, 2024.) There is more extensive discussion of this in the Preface, and elsewhere. See the Index.

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the empire instead. *The trading of anarchy for Christian arkys was the deflowering of the church.*¹⁸

He continues with a quick overview of Church History, indicating that. . .

Within the foregoing history of Christendom, there are two churches, two Christian groupings in particular, that stand out as different. They are the New Testament church and the Anabaptists of the Protestant Reformation.¹⁹

A little later he summarizes the five distinctives of these groups:

The New Testament church and the Anabaptists of the sixteenth century display five characteristics in common and in contrast to all forms of arky faith:

a. Neither gives a hint of wanting to legitimize any of the powers that be. Those all exist by God's sufferance; none can boast his blessing.

b. Neither shows any inclination to fight the arkys (even those perceived as most wicked) nor to compete with them (whether physically or verbally). There is no felt need to be knocking heads with them or trying to get power over them. It is not in any such contest that the future of the race is being decided.

c. Neither shows any interest in making something of itself in the eyes of the world — getting its power consolidated, finding the organizational structures that will make it more effective and influential. Both are content to be quite weak, and, shall we say, anarchistic.

d. Neither makes any big claims (or even small promises) about what it intends to do in the way of governing, saving, correcting, or even improving a lost and wrong world. Neither makes the sounds of a candidate for office.

e. Most of all, both show complete confidence that God can and will accomplish whatever he has in mind for his world, with or without their help. At his pleasure, God can use either arkys or anarchys, arkyists or anarchists. But he needs neither and, most definitely, licenses none.²⁰

Turning to biblical history, he sees a progression towards an anarchical ideal:

Clearly, the course of God's way with Israel — beginning with the prophets — was away from temple arky and toward the anarchic reality of the synagogue. In its turn, Christianity started out as a completely anarchic *ekklesia* and then drifted into churchly arkydom."²¹

Key to his "Christian Anarchy" is his denial of the traditional interpretation of Romans 13:1 - 7 — an interpretation dominant not surprisingly only since the era of Constantine, the time of the Great Reversal of Christian Anarchy.²²

He disallows that this text in anyway indicates that the state, provided it acts "justly," is to be

¹⁸ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 23; emphasis added.

¹⁹ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 32.

²⁰ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 42.

²¹ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 52. "*Ekklesia*/(*Ecclesia*)" means in New Testament context: Church.

²² In Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, we read:

A team of New Testament scholars in Germany has studied Romans 13 in its historical context.

These scholars have concluded that Paul was not teaching about the death penalty but was urging his readers to pay their taxes and not to participate in a rebellion against Nero's new tax. An insurrection against taxes had recently occurred and had led to Christians, including Priscilla and Aquila, being expelled from Rome. Another insurrection was brewing. The Greek word for "sword" (*machaira*) in Romans 13:4 refers to the symbol of authority carried by the police who accompanied tax collectors. Paul was urging Christians to make peace, pay Nero's new tax, and not rebel. He was not arguing for the death penalty, as he so often has been interpreted as doing. He was arguing against the violence of insurrection. (See: Friedrich, Pöhlmann, and Stuhlmacher, "Zur historischen Situation," 131 and following. (207)

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highly authoritative in our lives. He says it is neither a “god” nor a “satan” — rather a mixture of good and evil as are we. It therefore is neither to be legitimated or condemned by the Left or the Right.

Rather, reading the text anarchically, he says that Paul delegitimizes the political world as a whole, entirely bypassing affirming legitimacy of any government, tyrannical or democratic, Left or Right.

He supports this with several assertions, summarized below:

First, the ‘governing authorities’ are given as a specific example of the enemy, whom we are to love according to Romans 12, the immediate context of Romans 13.

Second, the Roman Empire elsewhere in Paul’s writings is part of the “principalities and powers” against which, as for instance in the Ephesians 6 text, we are fighting, albeit, and incidentally, never with “worldly weapons.”²³ It’s hard to imagine that Paul would think differently of Rome in this passage! Likewise, Paul was steeped in the Old Testament, which had a long tradition of opposing pagan governments.

Third, Paul himself had been badly treated under Rome, and was writing to a church, primarily of Jewish converts, broken up by an edict of Emperor Claudius a few years earlier which had dispelled all Jews from Rome. Paul also knew full well Rome’s role in the unlawful crucifixion of Jesus.

Fourth, the call to be “subject” to the authorities is not a legitimating of the authorities, rather a neutral counsel of “not-doing” — resistance, anger, assault, power play, or anything short of loving the enemy — the state of Rome. This is entirely in keeping with Jesus’ counsel of non-retaliation to cheek-slapping, etc.²⁴

Fifth, the institution of “worldly government” in ancient Israel, according to I Samuel 8 was a rejection of God! — even though God accepted Israel’s bad choice, and worked with Israel through it.

²³ II Corinthians 10:4.

²⁴ There is a significant passage in I Peter 4 that points in this direction: one should suffer only out of loyalty to Christ. It goes:

12 Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. **13** But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. **14** If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. **15** If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. **16** However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. **17** For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (Emphasis added.)

Another possible translation of the Greek word for “meddler” is “revolutionary.” In the Greek, the word “even” does not appear. Certainly, the word “revolutionary” fits the context better!

Is it not possible that the very bias of the translators, influenced by a pro-state interpretation, which made them choose against thinking that early Christians could ever have been viewed as “revolutionaries”?

The improbability is there that, in a line-up of “murderer,” “thief,” “evildoer” — fairly heavy-duty accusations Christians by Peter are enjoined against incurring — he would finish off with “a [mere] busybody?”

In light of what we read in Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics* (207), it is possible — *even likely?* — that Peter, who cites Paul approvingly elsewhere in his letters (II Peter 3:15), could very well be following Paul in this concern, as explained in the quote:

Paul was not teaching about the death penalty but was urging his readers to pay the taxes and not to participate in a rebellion against Nero’s new tax. An insurrection against taxes had recently occurred and had led to Christians, including Priscilla and Aquila, being expelled from Rome. Another insurrection was brewing. (Stassen and Gushee, *Kingdom Ethics*, 207.)

I know however of no English language translation which uses the word “revolutionary.” (See: Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 39.)

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But he clearly never approved it. Eller says:

Paul knows that worldly government is an illegitimate usurpation of God's power — knows it as well as God and Samuel did. However, what his well-justified-in-hating-Rome readers need also to know is that God accepted his own rejection as accomplished fact and thus proceeded to accept (yet hardly "legitimate") worldly government as a "given," a human necessity through which he just might be able to prevent some damage and perhaps even gain a bit of good.²⁵

Sixth, the governing authorities are called "servants of God" in the same way the bloodthirsty Assyrian hordes in Isaiah were.²⁶ And the pagan Persian Emperor Cyrus is even called God's "messiah" or "christ," and "shepherd."²⁷ If God can say such brutal and pagan hordes are "God's boys," then he could also use the Roman "no-goods," the governing authorities, in the same way.

Seventh, the Romans used a completely pagan system of justice, entirely retributive and punitive in its goal (especially in slave law), totally unlike the merciful justice of God. Nonetheless, just as the justice of the pagan Assyrians was likewise brutal and entirely opposite to God's justice, still God works through the pagan justice system of a godless Roman, or any other, state. So don't resist the state, Paul says, partly because it will punish you if you do; partly because of conscience, since God works through even their wrong kind of punitive justice to do "good."

Eighth, the only thing owed anyone, including the enemy state, is love.

And finally, in his words:

Nevertheless, though the arkys all be under judgment (as all of us individuals are, too), God will use as servant whatever arky he chooses (when he chooses and how he chooses). He will also punish these servants the same way — even while loving each and every human individual involved the whole time. That's Christian Anarchy."²⁸

To summarize then:

Eller's thesis is that Christian Anarchy is actually a major theme in Church History. He locates a strong Old Testament background but identifies Jesus as the true founder of the tradition. Paul carried on the idea, but when the church became institutionalized as the official religion of the Roman empire, the concept was all but lost. It resurfaced in the Anabaptism of the Reformation's radical wing.²⁹

Though it can be found here and there throughout Church History as well.

Christian Anarchy is the faith in God's primacy as sovereign Lord and "orderer" of history which is given such weight that all the big claims of self-confident human scheming and power-play become sheer distraction.³⁰

²⁵ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 200.

²⁶ Isaiah 13:3 - 5 & 10:5 - 7, 12 - 13.

²⁷ Isaiah 44:28; 45:1, 4, 13.

²⁸ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, 204.

²⁹ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, back cover.

In these allusions to the Anabaptist Tradition, in the light of the upcoming 500th-anniversary celebration of that Tradition in 2025, I point to my post about the troubling dark side of said Tradition: "The Anabaptist Tradition, Peacemaking, John Howard Yoder and Mennonite Feminists'/Other Mennonite Leaders' Call for a Dramatic Revision of a Common Contemporary Mennonite Narrative," May 6, 2024

(<https://waynenorthey.com/2024/05/06/the-anabaptist-tradition-peacemaking-john-howard-yoder-and-mennonite-feminists-other-mennonite-leaders-call-for-a-dramatic-revision-of-a-common-contemporary-narrative/>, accessed August 23, 2024).

³⁰ Eller, *Christian Anarchy*, back cover.

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It is the ultimate rejection of any secular/religious division of the world. There is only one Lord, and hence only one legitimate Power, King, Ruler, Prime Minister or President: all and everyone else is relative and decidedly under judgment after that. *"Jesus is Lord" is the heart cry of the Christian Anarchist.*

And with that, we cry out: *Maranatha!* Come, Lord (Jesus)! Amen.

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