

Introduction

KINGS, IDOLS, AND DISCIPLESHIP

A short fuse to scatter steady hands if I forget to remember that better lives have been lived in the margins, locked in the prisons and lost on the gallows than have ever been enshrined in palaces.

—PROPAGANDHI (PURINA HALL OF FAME)

In the third chapter of the book of Daniel, we find the story of King Nebuchadnezzar's vain attempt to have all of those under his command worship his gods. The king, who only moments earlier proclaimed his undying loyalty to the God of Israel, creates a massive golden statue and demands people of every nation and tongue, at the cue of his "entire musical ensemble," to fall down and worship it. As the music played "all the peoples, nations, and languages fell down and worshipped" the golden statue (Dan 3:7).

This is not entirely true. There were a few who refused to comply. Scripture tells us there were "certain Jews . . . appointed over the affairs of the province of Babylon" who refused to obey the king. Their names were Hannaniah, Mishael, and Azariah, (or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, as the empire sought to rename them), and their disobedience did not go unnoticed. Nebuchadnezzar was furious. He sent for the three and commanded them to immediately bow and worship his creation. If they persisted in their noncompliance, they were told they would be cast into a fiery furnace. Alas, our heroes did not relent. They refused to worship his creation. They told the king that they felt no need to make a defense for their actions, and, furthermore, if their God so chose to save them then God would do it. "But if not," they continued, "be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods and we will not worship the golden statue you have set up" (Dan 3:18).

The narrative ends, as most of us are aware, with the three surviving the fire and the king going mad. It is quite the inspirational, and thus popular, story. We do so love our “tough” heroes. I fear, despite the popularity of this story (or perhaps because of it), we are tempted to domesticate and romanticize it in order for it to mesh with the kind of disembodied Christianity prevalent in North America. The first time I heard this story, for example, I could not have been much older than six, and yet it was told to me in such a way that I never got the idea that the actions of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were either remotely radical or political. Of course, it may be a bit much to assume that at six years of age I should know anything more than the story itself. This may be true, but rare is the occasion that one would hear this story told in such a way that we might find *ourselves* threatened by something analogous to a furnace (a jail cell?). Despite the fact that these three men were well aware that God might not save them, they still refused to accommodate the king’s wishes. Though they all worked in the service of the king, they remained capable of discerning when their leader asked that which cannot be given. I just wonder how this story could be told today so that we too could see when what is demanded of us becomes an occasion for idolatry.

Perhaps this story is much too easy. The idolatry is plain to see even by most six-year-old children. But how do we make the connection between Nebuchadnezzar’s demands and the demands placed on us now by our “kings” that do not appear, at first glance, to be problematic? That is, what kind of resources would be necessary for Christians today to understand when something is being asked of them that should not be given to those who call themselves our benefactors? This is something of a rhetorical question, for I think we already have the resources—scripture and tradition—necessary to make such careful distinctions. I say scripture *and* tradition for scripture is not self-interpreting. Scripture is often, consciously or not, manipulated to suit our own purposes. I hope to avoid this dilemma, but I can never be too confident that I have accomplished a faithful reading of scripture. I must rely on tradition, as well as a community of faith—an actual body of believers—to help me interpret scripture well. In fact, part of what this book hopes to accomplish is to suggest that some of our best, if not, *the* best resources we have for living as Christians is biographical. The stories of Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego; Ruth, Esther, and Sarah; Hosea, Amos, and Jeremiah;

John, Peter, Mary, and Paul all constitute a tradition of interpretation that is still exemplified in the lives of those who continue to conform their will to God. One of the questions I will explore in this book is whether the witness of law- (and church-) breakers such as Dorothy Day, Clarence Jordan, and the Berrigan brothers maintain a line of continuity with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abendego. Is there a sense in which those who would now stand up against the king are in the same prophetic tradition that produced the aforementioned saints of scripture? If so, what does this mean for how we understand their witness and how, in turn, we live prophetic lives? Specifically, we must ask the question: How are Christians living in a post-Christian climate, though still residing in a nominally Christian culture, capable of discerning when it is time to say, “Be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods . . . ?”

This is a very difficult question to answer. Living under an empire that requires its presidents to swear loyalty to Jesus if they wish to win the presidency dupes us into thinking that loyalty to the empire is synonymous with loyalty to Christ. This conflated sense of dual citizenship is confusing as we too readily assume that what it means to be faithful citizens of the United States of America is harmonious with what it means to be faithful citizens of the church. On the contrary, our allegiance as Christians to the universal church must take precedence over our allegiance to everything else; not only the state, but to anything that would tempt us to domesticate our discipleship (market, family, career, etc.). I wish to challenge such assumptions about citizenship, not because I am anti-empire, but because I am pro-church. This is a matter of missiology, for it is only in our ability to be faithful to the church that we make it possible for the empires of this world to know the resurrected Christ.

That being said my position, for lack of a better word, commits me to what may be called an anarchical posture. Though this may be the case I need to be clear that I do not believe in anything called “anarchy.” I do not believe in anarchy/anarchism any more than I believe in democracy or socialism. I am simply unclear as to what it means to profess belief in any political ideology. Given, however, that this is a book that adopts the terminology of anarchism to make certain arguments, it is necessary to examine, in the first chapter, what it means to either adopt, or be adopted by, the language of anarchy. My reasoning is that regardless of whether or not such language can appropriately be referenced in light of Christian

discipleship, it is important to at least understand that the pejorative accounts we have imbibed have been, for the most part, neither fair nor faithful to the etymology of the word. I will therefore pave a little space in the first chapter for the discussion of what it might mean to be a Christian anarchist.

It will become clear in the second chapter that I do not advocate so much for an anarchist politics as I do for an apocalyptic politics. Christians live in the secular, the time between times, where God's kingdom is here, yet not in its entirety. We follow a slaughtered yet resurrected Lamb and it is our task to bear witness to this Lamb in a manner that reveals God's in-breaking kingdom. Our manner of life, as it is patterned after the crucified Son of God, appears as nothing more than folly to the world. It cannot be anything other than folly, for it is predicated on a kingdom that is not of this world. It is a kingdom that all other kingdoms must consider a threat, in that it demands a loyalty beyond the temporal. It will be necessary, therefore, to provide a careful examination of this political realm that is appropriately referred to as "upside-down" in relation to the kingdoms of this world. Chapter two will be an exposition of the politics of being a Christian in relation to the privilege of bearing witness to Jesus' present yet coming kingdom.

In order not to privilege theory over practice, the remaining chapters will examine the lives of those Christians who make such reflection, as seen in the first two chapters, possible. The majority of this book is little more than the attempt to re-tell the stories of those who have embodied Christianity well. Chapters three through five will function as brief case studies in the lives of certain twentieth-century figures who have understood and practiced the kingdom of heaven as their primary citizenship. I have narrowed my focus to Christians whose vocation lent them to an anarchical posture *in the sense* that the apparatus of the state was not necessary for their role as followers of Jesus. In order to avoid risking errant claims about Christian anarchists and their relationship to other states, I have chosen to examine only a few Christian anarchists of the twentieth century living directly under the rule of the United States. This is one thing I share with the folks examined in this text, and it is from this sense of having a dual citizenship, one as a member of the body politic known as the United States and the other as a member of the body politic known as the church, that I am required to write.

I will conclude with offering a brief epilogue that takes seriously issues of effectiveness and failure as truthful results of faithfulness. I want

to pay special attention to the oft-heard claim that the lives of these radicals were less than effective at making real change. In one of the courses I teach I use Philip Berrigan's autobiography *Fighting The Lamb's War*, and a prominent criticism constantly leveled by the students is that for all of his efforts he accomplished very little. Of course we need to provide a careful examination of what something like "accomplished very little" really means, but I do take seriously their concerns. Moments such as these offer me the opportunity to reflect on how effectiveness, understood as some sort of utilitarian calculus, is not how we gauge faithfulness. Indeed, failure may very well be a sign that one is working with the grain of Jesus' cross. That Jesus had three friends show up to his crucifixion looked like nothing more, at the time, than the grandest failure of all. His cry of "My God, my God why have you forsaken me?" does not exactly scream success either (Matt 27:46). Nevertheless, the resurrection of a slaughtered lamb, slaughtered by the principalities and powers at work within the realm of Roman politics and Jesus' own religious tradition, turns our understanding of success and failure on its head. His resurrection does not render his death, and the path that led to it, moot—it authenticates the path. In doing so, it vindicates what may appear to be the ineffectual and worthless witness of a few radical Christians standing against the world's strongest empire.

Throughout these chapters there will be dialogue with Scripture as well as commentary, both theoretical and biographical, in terms of the relationship between church and state. When appropriate, dialogue with proponents of anarchism will occur, but never as an attempt to replace or reformulate the all-encompassing task of simply *being* a Christian. The task of practicing Christianity in no way hinges upon the Christian embodying anarchism; rather, the fact that baptism alone constitutes the Christian as Christian renders Christian practice anarchical—even in relation to anarchism.

THE TRIPLE AXIS OF EVIL: THE SOUNDTRACK OF OUR LIVES

Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted.

—MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

The reader will find that I have purposely attempted to focus on those Christian anarchists that have directly addressed Martin Luther King

Jr.'s naming of the triple axis of evil: materialism, racism, and militarism. King astutely understood the interconnections between these three evils. During the height of the Vietnam War, a war King called senseless and liable to the judgment of God, King perceptively put together how such an order required violence and the inequality of classes and races in order to continue. He concluded that a revolution of sorts, the embracing of a modified form of socialism, would have to occur to correct such a culture.¹ The particular genius of the Christians examined in this book is that they recognized the connections between violence, economic greed, and racism. Though each chapter primarily focuses on only one of these three aspects, any study worthy of their lives will reveal how they each resisted King's triple axis of evil. Limited as I am by time and space, I am only going to focus on one particular aspect for chapters three through five. Hopefully, this explains my decision to examine how the Catholic Worker movement calls into question our basic assumptions about money, how a white Baptist farmer from Georgia fights racism, and how a couple of priests nonviolently standing against a violent empire exposes how militant is our predilection for violence.

There are countless other witnesses to the way of Christ throughout the world, and they do not all have to look like these particular individuals. However, I do think that our witness must bear a certain family resemblance. For those examined in this book, there are common threads found throughout their lives that attempt to respond to both injustice and the appropriate giving of one's allegiance. Thus we notice certain commonalities between these chapters in regards to the sharing of goods, the practice of nonviolence, and concerns of racial equality. Most importantly, however, we see a common desire from these individuals to take seriously God's words in the book of Amos:

I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies . . . Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.
(5:21, 23–24)

We live in a culture saturated with mawkish music that passes under the rubric of "Christian" while millions of people attempt to survive without

1. For an analysis of the kind of socialism King desired, see Michael Long's *Against Us, But For Us*, 131–69.

adequate housing, food, health care, or clothing. Churches spend time arguing over the best way to “praise” Jesus: Should it be contemporary music full of guitars, drums, and screen-projected clichéd lyrics? Or, should it be the old-time hymns constitutive of organs, hymnals, and one too many “thou’s”? I think the debate, while potentially significant, misses the larger point. We praise God not through our singing, but through our ability to care for the widow, the orphan, and the poor. The Christians in this book share the common tendency to see through the festivals, assemblies, and noise of such a banal Christianity as they attempt to participate in the kind of justice and righteousness pleasing to God. It is the kind of justice—for there are many different kinds—that seeks to make visible the city on the hill that cannot be hidden (Matt 5:14). The hope of the Christian is to worship God in such a way that attracts others to God. It is the idea that we might participate in God’s incarnation, providing a glimpse of the God that cannot be seen, by the manner in which we love one another (1 John 4:12). In loving one another, even our enemies, we give allegiance to the eternal city. That allegiance is signified in our baptismal practices that constitute the peculiar politics of this city—the politics of “maladjusted creativity.” That this city has produced a people through time as various as Catholic clergy arrested for civil disobedience and Southern Baptists excommunicated from their own church, is, I think, a wonderful sign that God’s peaceable kingdom respects no denominational boundaries or arbitrarily placed borders, but hinges only upon those who have decided to live into their baptisms.