

its transformation into Laotian culture. After providing a concise summary of the Valmiki (Indian) version, Holt engages details of the Laotian version, the *Phra Lak Phra Lam*, in which he not only sees vast differences between them, but also notes how the Theravāda Buddhist characters are reflected in the Laotian redaction, including the idea of karmic retribution (265).

The second appendix extends another popular Laotian cultural belief, practice, and ritual ceremony or *sukhwan basi*. It is, both ritually and religiously performed at all important occasions, including during pregnancy, marriage, childbirth, and ordination. In Holt's understanding, the *khwan* (vital essence, inner spirit, and life force) is inner psychic energy attached to each individual, but it can leave the body any time. If it leaves for prolonged periods, it can bring about bad consequences which include suffering, disease, and misfortune (271). In order to restore good fortune the *sukhwan basi*-ceremony is performed.

The strength of the book lies on Holt's ability to analyze critically comparative phenomenon of different Buddhist cultural practices and his analytical descriptions. This book is well informed by contemporary scholarship on the animistic Buddhist culture of Laos. My only critique is that the book has little ethnographic narration. Nonetheless, it is an important book for those who are looking for new issues in studies of Buddhism. It greatly contributes, not only to the field of religion, Buddhist, and Laotian studies, but also to Southeast Asian studies. This book also deserves to be fully welcomed by socio-cultural anthropology as well as political historical studies. I highly recommend everyone to read this marvelous book.

Christian Anarchism. A Political Commentary on the Gospel

Abridged Edition. Alexandre Christoyannopoulos. Charlottesville, VA: Imprint Academic, 2011.

ISBN 978-1845402471. Pp. 280.

Review by Aaron Ricker, McGill University

From the theatre of political protest to T-shirt sales at the mall, the brand equity of anarchism is growing, and this trend includes the subcultures of Christian theology and biblical studies. Books like Dave Andrews' *Christi-anarchy* are now appearing quite regularly, reworking Jacques Ellul or John Howard Yoder for more mainstream evangelical audiences. In this situation, Christoyannopoulos' new book should be a welcome addition, based as it is on six years of doctoral research at the University of Kent. Unfortunately, though, *Christian Anarchism* may confuse more than it clarifies when it comes to understanding the historical and theoretical relationships between Christian and anarchist traditions. "The aim of my doctoral thesis—and by

extension, this book—was to pull together and portray as fairly coherent and sound the various publications I have come across which argue that Christianity logically implies anarchism,” Christoyannopoulos writes (240). He aims, in other words, to use selected readings and his own retrospective synthetic logic to triangulate the lost anarchist gospel of Jesus himself. With this goal in mind, *Christian Anarchism* offers readers “a varied set of reflections and exegeses that, in my view, all enrich the overarching argument that Christianity today implies a form of anarchism” (240), and ends with an anarchist altar call in which “Jesus calls humanity back to God’s vision of a stateless kingdom” (241).

On the positive side, the materials and topics Christoyannopoulos reviews in making his argument are important and interesting when it comes to understanding the understudied relationships between Christian and anarchist systems of thinking. He begins, for example, with lightning introductions to Christian anarchists like Tolstoy, Ellul, Vernard Eller, and Dorothy Day, as well as “supportive thinkers” like Walter Wink and Ched Myers. These writers offer the kinds of Christian anarchist “threads” that Christoyannopoulos will “weave together” (1) in the chapters that follow, as he applies his argumentative synthesis of their thought to seven topics. His first section addresses “The Sermon on the Mount: a Manifesto for Christian Anarchism” (30–66), “The Anarchism Implied in Jesus’ Other Teachings and Example” (67–106), and the legacy of Constantinian Christianity in “The State’s Wickedness and the Church’s Infidelity” (107–145), all with reference to selected thinkers and their readings of selected biblical passages. The second section of the book applies the same method to framing “The Christian Anarchist Response” to government as we know it, with prescriptive chapters on “Responding to the State” (147–173) and “Collective Witness as the True Church” (174–195), another quick but interesting historical review in “Examples of Christian Anarchist Witness” (197–213), and a theological Conclusion on “The Prophetic Role of Christian Anarchism” (214–239).

Christian Anarchism is a very close re-write of Christoyannopoulos’s PhD dissertation, “Theorising Christian Anarchism,” and the uncertainty around that deleted first word points to the best and worst of his project. I appreciate the honesty with which Christoyannopoulos presents open advocacy and argument on behalf of traditions he feels deserve more attention, instead of trying to make the same case without ever leaving the relative safety of some academic pose of pure objectivity. On the other hand, remembering incorrectly can sometimes be even worse than forgetting, and if the constellations of Christian and anarchist thinking he reviews are to be remembered and understood properly, the process needs more theorizing, not less. Christoyannopoulos does not address the theoretical difference, for example, between discovering shared ground among Gospel readers and inventing one’s own new ground. He does not offer any theoretical justification for his basic controlling

idea that synthesizing anarchist readings of the Gospels can somehow provide a window back through those traditions to an original anarchist gospel preached by the historical Jesus. It seems to me that a good theoretical treatment would ask why the Gospels preserve these passages that appeal to these anarchists. It would offer frameworks for incorporating “non-theological” factors like the historical legal ineligibility of most early Christians for government service, the comparable ancient “anarchist” propaganda of the Cynics, and the infamous ability of clever readers to find whatever they like in holy books. It would also ask why Christian anarchism just happens to be gaining mainstream attention now that Christian theologians have lost so much of their direct political power.

In short, a project aimed at theorizing Christian anarchism is just what is needed, and it would be more about trying to understand traditions that look arguably anarchistic in retrospect, in terms of first-century subcultures and evolving discussions, than about dreaming up and chasing down a unique and unified lost theological treasure. I am not arguing that intellectuals must always do history and never theology, but it seems to me that in this case doing theology before history jumps the gun, and doing theology dressed up as history points the gun at one’s own foot. We are living, after all, in a world where Bakunin’s “No gods, no masters” has conquered, partly due to the well-known historical excesses of Christian power, and it is already hard enough to give Christian anarchism a fair trial. Our own city of Montreal manages to host the biggest anarchist book fair in North America year after year without including a single book or workshop on the historical connections and cross-fertilizations between Christian and anarchist theory and practice. “Christian” anarchist roots like Proudhon’s or Thoreau’s are ignored as “merely cultural,” or erased as failures. In such a volatile climate, it is very dangerous to present Christian anarchism as a long-lost grand unified secret gospel that just happens to appeal to some disenfranchised Christian intellectuals today. It gives hostile critics a chance to dismiss the entire question as a pop theologian’s wild goose chase.

I applaud Christoyannopoulos, then, for insisting that anarchist thinking is indicative and interesting when it comes to understanding many roots and branches of Christian culture. I also think he makes some good choices about who and what to remember. When scholars open up such conversations, though, we wade into ancient, bitter culture battles that continue today, and it can get dirty fast. We need to learn to stir such waters without further muddying them.