Freedom and Risk:
An Analysis of Christian Anarchism and Creative Ethics

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ABSTRACT
This paper argues that the discourse of anarchism has much to say to ethical theory, and surprisingly, to Christian ethical theory, with which it shares several fundamental premises and goals. In particular, it explicates the central motifs of the work of Nikolai Berdyaev, drawing such into a larger discussion of anarchistic and Christian ethics more generally, and to contemporary writers such as the new-anarchist Murray Bookchin and the feminist theologian/ethicist Sharon Welch. Out of these are tied together the strands of what might be called a *creative Christian ethics of risk*, based upon the centrality of freedom and the transformation of the person; which can contribute not only to an understanding of what it means to be a Christian (Kierkegaard's fundamental issue), but also to an understanding of ethics in post-modernity, where certainty and homogeneity need no longer hold sway. I do not contend that anarchism and Christianity are one, or that Christian must become anarchists or vice versa, but merely that the voice of anarchism, and the voice of Christian anarchism in particular, is a powerful addition to our moral discourse.

For all critical observers of the age, there is no overlooking the fact that nowadays, in our atomized society, religion can provide an urgently needed existential security and an intellectual home. But it can also develop an incomparable power of resistance against the destructive forces, against the modern process of alienation, against totalitarian systems of every shade, even black. Religion thus can have an eminently humanizing, liberating function, and de facto it has again and again had this function—religion, not as the opium, but the remedium, of the people.
– Hans Küng

The main position of an ethics which recognizes the paradox of good and evil may be formulated as follows: act as though you could hear the Divine call to participate through free and creative activity in the Divine work; cultivate in yourself a pure and original conscience, discipline your personality, struggle with evil in yourself and around you - not in order to relegate the wicked to hell and create a kingdom of evil, but to conquer evil and to further a creative regeneration of the wicked.
– Nikolai Berdyaev

At first sight, using the words "Christianity" and "anarchism" in the same sentence seems haphazard, inviting oxymoron. Is not Christianity rooted in God's authority and the Lordship of Christ, whose law is binding in our hearts and souls? And is not anarchy a call to the license of hedonism and lawless revelry? Certainly, Christians and anarchists in the past have been less than spiritual brothers, in part because anarchism as a socio-political movement arose in large part, like socialism, in reaction to the statist authority of which the Church has often played a large part, and was a revolt against the "opiate" of Church teachings, which were seen (with some justice) as ideological weapons of the bourgeoisie used to quell revolt and perpetuate the misery of the underclasses of industrial society.

If Christianity was problematic to the political left, anarchism itself has taken, in our century, an almost purely pejorative connotation in everyday speech; it has come to signify disorder, rashness, nihilism, violence, and wild unpredictability, all things anathema not only to some vague political elite but to most sane members of late-twentieth century liberal-democratic society. At this stage of world history, however, when Marxism has been thoroughly blackened by the crimes perpetuated in its name (and stands thus chastened, like Christianity), it may be of use to rethink other left alternatives; other radical and liberatory voices which have been smothered in the twentieth century Marxist domination of the Left.

Of course, political anarchism is hardly free from taint itself, but it can certainly no longer be dismissed for its violence after the horrors of the Gulag. Even so, the discourse of anarchism has much to say to ethical theory, and surprisingly, to Christian ethical theory, with which it shares several fundamental premises and goals. Despite the mutual hostility of the two, we only have to look at the few examples of the connection between Christianity and anarchism to see the potential power behind such: Dorothy Day and the American Catholic Worker's Movement is the most obvious example, but there are others—Christoph Blumhardt, Leo Tolstoy, whose work influenced Gandhi and Martin Luther King, and another Russian, less well known than Tolstoy but just as determined to work out a practicable Christian social ethics rooted in anarchistic principles, Nikolai Berdyaev.

This essay analyses the central motifs of the work of Berdyaev, drawing such into a larger discussion of anarchistic and Christian ethics more generally, and to contemporary writers such as the new-anarchist Murray Bookchin and the Feminist theologian/ethicist Sharon Welch. Out of these I hope to tie together the strands of what might be called a creative Christian ethics of risk, one based upon the centrality of freedom and the transformation of the person; which can contribute not only to an understanding of what it means to be a Christian (Kierkegaard's fundamental issue), but also to an understanding of ethics in post-modernity, where certainty and homogeneity need no longer hold sway. I do not contend that anarchism and Christianity are one, or that Christian must become anarchists or vice versa, but merely that the voice of anarchism, and the voice of Christian anarchism in particular, is a powerful addition to our moral discourse.

Anarchism and Christianity
The revolutionary project must avoid the sectarian cretinism of Marxism and become commensurate with the enormous social possibilities of our time, for just as the material preconditions of freedom have expanded beyond the most generous dreams of the past, so too has the vision of freedom.
– Murray Bookchin

The virulent atheism of classical anarchism can be traced to the origins of the movement in theory and socio-political

practice, in such figures as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and particularly Mikhail Bakunin, the Promethean firebrand who waged war against the State and Church with equal vehemence. The *pater diabolicus* of the nihilist branch of anarchism, Bakunin's energy and vigor made him somewhat of a cult figure among European radicals; and it was he who solidified the anarchists position on religion: by its nature, he proclaimed, religion (of any sort, but Christianity in particular) is an impoverishment, enslavement, and annihilation of humanity (Bakunin xi). As a weapon (and a powerful one) of the State, it must be smashed before self-determination can be possible. For Bakunin it is not only the institutional aspect of religion that is harmful, however, the very essence of religion, he says, is the disparagement of humanity for the greater glory of God: "God being everything the real world and man are nothing; God being truth, justice, goodness, beauty, power and life, man is falsehood, iniquity, evil, ugliness, impotence, and death. God being master, man is the slave" (75). Thus, *pace* Voltaire, the father of the revolution of the deed proclaims that "If God really existed, it would be necessary to abolish him." Yet even Bakunin submits that the "great honor" of Christianity, its "incontestable merit" and the secret of its "unprecedented" and yet "thoroughly legitimate" triumph lay in "the fact that it appealed to the suffering and immense public to which the ancient world, a strict and cruel intellectual and political aristocracy, denied even the simplest right of humanity."

If Bakunin stands at the one pole of the development of nineteenth and twentieth century anarchism, perhaps his fellow countryman Peter Kropotkin is representative of the other, more sober and deliberative side. Kropotkin, who put forth the concept of mutualism in his seminal *Mutual Aid,* is less critical of Christianity *per se* than Bakunin, pointing out that religious reform movement often had an anarchist or libertarian basis. Early Christianity, says Kropotkin, was such a movement which set itself in opposition both to Judaic formalism and Roman immorality, but eventually "degenerated into an ecclesiastical movement modeled upon the ancient Hebrew church and upon Imperial Rome itself, which killed the Anarchistic germ, assumed human governmental forms, and became in time the chief bulwark of government, slavery, and oppression" (Marshall 336).

Kropotkin's sympathy with the early Church is shared by many radical Christians, and although there is a danger of romanticizing the pre-Constantinian institutionalization of Christianity, it is unquestionable that in the persecuted and minority Church we see great evidence of heroism and liberatory struggle. Jesus himself has been cited as a fellow anarchist by Dorothy Day, Ammon Hennacy, and Tolstoy, while Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan, in his recent book *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography,* claims that, while perhaps not purposively (i.e. intentionally or solely) "political," the socio-religious ideals of Jesus were of a sort so radical and threatening as to upset both religious and political authorities. Yet to call Jesus a radical is not to call him a socialist of the Marxian sort, for several reasons: the breadth of his message, which, though in some sense socio-ethical, was also undeniably spiritual; and the poor to whom he addressed his message most directly, cannot be made into a proto-proletariat. Crossan notes that there are in fact two Greek terms for "poor": *penes,* which refers to the majority working peasants, making a bare subsistence but incorporated into the socio-religious system of the day; and *ptochos,* the truly destitute, a family or individual pushed into begging, prostitution, crime, and those ostracized because of disease or physical handicap (Crossan 60).[1] It is these latter to whom Jesus almost always refers, and it is these who are "blessed" in the Gospels—i.e., those *not only* outside of the margins of society in economic and political terms, but also the victims of socio-religious oppression. In short, these poor were not the proletarians of Marxian dreams but rather the *lumpen* so reviled by Marx, those without any sort of legitimacy, who were completely outside the prevailing social, political, economic, and religious structure.

What does this imply? One does not need to spiritualize Jesus remarks (as Matthew does: "Blessed are the poor [in spirit]") to see the implications; thinking not just of personal or individual sin/evil but at the same time (and inextricably linked with) social, structural, and systemic injustice, the sayings of Jesus become radical in a powerful, anarchistic way: In a situation of oppression, especially like the oppression of the Euro-American bourgeois spirit, where "injustice wears a mask of normalcy or even of necessity," the only ones blessed or innocent are "those squeezed out deliberately as human junk from the system's own evil operations" (Crossan 62). A contemporary equivalent might be the statement that "only the homeless are innocent"—a "terrifying aphorism" against society because it focuses not just on personal or individual use of power, nor even on the oppression of classes as conceived in Marxism, but upon the systemic abuse in all its manifold facets, the diffuse power of oppression which engulfs economic, political and spiritual freedoms.

Beyond Marxism

All this leads to a critique of traditional left-political liberation and the ethics (or lack of such) in the classical Marxist tradition. As Crossan says, this alternative reading of Jesus forces us, all of us in the West, to confront our complicity in systemic evil, which goes well beyond eco-political class structures. Neo-anarchists like Murray Bookchin believe that Marxism has ceased to be applicable to our time, not because it is too visionary or revolutionary, but because it is too one-sided, it is *not visionary or revolutionary enough* (Bookchin "Listen" 177). Marx and Engels were avowed and devoted centralists, not only politically, but socially and economically[2]; a fact criticized by anarchists of the day like Bakunin but which can be even more justifiably condemned in our own era, after we have witnessed the horrors of communist centralization, and in a time where old liberal dreams of universalization and homogeneity may be obsolete. "Th[e] pursuit of security in the past, th[e] attempt to find a haven in fixed dogma and an organizational hierarchy as substitutes for creative thought and praxis is bitter evidence of how little many revolutionaries are capable of 'revolutionizing themselves and things', much less of revolutionizing society as a whole" (175).

Even the classical anarchists, in contrast to the Marxists of the time (besides the few heterodox Marxists like William Morris) gave considerable attention to "integral education"— the development of the *whole* personality—to counteract the debasing and banalizing influence of bourgeois society, which corrupted and limited one's potentiality in strictly material terms but stifled one's creativity and flattened one's soul. Despite their differences, what anarcho-communist or social anarchist organizations share is the primacy of organic development from below; they are social movements, combining a *creative revolutionary lifestyle* with a *creative revolutionary theory.* They are not political parties whose goals and modes of life are indistinguishable from the

surrounding bourgeois environment and "whose ideology is reduced to rigid 'tried and true programs'" (214).

Marxists of the past and those left with us today often assume that theirs is the only legitimate and truly left political analysis and praxis; this hubris is particularly evident in the holding on to Marx's traditional class line and to the rhetoric attached to such, which, if ever applicable, is certainly no longer so, at least in the West, and probably in the "developing world" as well. We need only turn to Bakunin for an alternative vision, and despite his atheism, a vision which gives more weight to the spiritual and ethical elements of struggle, whether it be from political oppression or the larger bourgeois spirit that is part of this political oppression. Bakunin quite accurately predicted the *embourgeoisement* of the industrial working-class with the development of capitalist industry, the expansion of markets to the Third World, and the turn from production capitalism to consumption capitalism. In Bakunin's view, and here we must reflect upon Crossan's picture of Jesus, the most revolutionary class is not in fact the industrial proletariat, but the uprooted peasantry and urban *déclassés*, once gain the rural and urban *lumpen* elements so heartily despised by the founders of Marxism. Moreover, it is clear today that terms like "classes" and "class struggle"—conceived of almost entirely as economic categories and relations—ring false to our ears, and are clearly too one-sided to express the universality of the struggle against oppression of mind, body, and spirit.[3]

Sobornost and the Struggle Against Bourgeoisism
The "Bourgeois Spirit" is not a product of Capitalism, but Capitalism strengthened and consolidated it, and proletarians and socialists are easily infected with it. It has bred materialism, "economicism," the worship of material success, the denial of the spiritual world and of a future life.
– Nikolai Berdyaev

Nikolai Berdyaev was a Russian thinker caught in the whirlwind of history: a fierce and unrelenting critic of the tsarist regime and the Russian Orthodox Church, he remained a deeply spiritual man and sought religious reform; having sympathy with Marxism, he embraced the Revolution, only to denounce it shortly afterwards not for its socio-political ideals but for its spiritual depravity and ethical lack. Under suspicion by each regime in turn, he was eventually exiled to the West, where he remained critical yet at the same time defended Russian ideals against Western bourgeoisism. Berdyaev can be placed in a line of so-called "existentialist" Christian thinkers stretching back to Pascal, through to Kierkegaard, and in our own century Unamuno and Gabriel Marcel. Yet Berdyaev was no dogmatist, even towards existentialism, which he thought led to nihilistic pessimism (whether it be Sartrean existentialism or Karl Barth's neo-Orthodoxy), a "cultured despair" that was in itself a deeply bourgeois symptom. Unlike these other thinkers, Berdyaev comes from the Russian Orthodox tradition, which often speaks a very different language than Roman Catholicism or Protestantism, particularly with regards to human relations with the Divine.

One important trope of the Russian Orthodoxy is the concept of *sobornost*, which is the "altogetherness" that is the dynamic life of the collective body in which a person finds fulfillment, without losing her personality; this is often set up against the Western Christian tradition (and Western politics and philosophy) which are heirs to the victory of rationalism and individualism over the true community spirit of Christianity.

Berdyaev, at once quintessentially Russian, was an orthodox heretic—like Pascal and Unamuno, he moved "in the sphere of Christian problematics which demands creative efforts of thought and where the most divergent opinions are naturally allowable" (Berdyaev, quoted in Clarke 18). Berdyaev realized that Marxism, for all its potentiality, was doomed to founder upon its own spiritual vacuity, one which is allows it to be victim to bourgeoisism, the spirit of *homo economicus*. Marx, says Berdyaev, merely transferred infallibility from the people to the proletariat, but it exists no more than in one than in the other; Marxism created a new proletarian mythology which puts fictions in place of realities, and holds to the (bourgeois) shibboleths of rationalism and utilitarianism. "The positive ideals of socialists and communists are eminently middle-class: the ideals of the dreary paradise of the factory, of power, of material prosperity… [while] this does not at all exclude the presence of a positive truth in communism and socialism…it is no good fighting the bourgeois spirit with an economic weapon (that is only a valid weapon against Capitalism), it must be fought *with another spirit*" (*Christianity* 5, my emphases).

Thus, the bourgeois spirit, or *bourgeoisism*, is an altogether special phenomenon to be distinguished from *social bourgeoisism*, and it has not necessarily anything to do with class. The French poet Léon Bloy proclaims in a similar vein that it is Christianity, not socialism or the proletariat that is radically opposed to bourgeoisism, though both he and Berdyaev are all too aware that there is such a thing as bourgeois Christianity as well, and this in fact is to be abhorred more than anything else. It is our business, says Berdyaev, to not only overcome bourgeois relations between men, which reach their apogee in capitalist society, but also to overcome the bourgeois attitude towards life, of which socialism is merely another expression. This attitude to life is essentially an attitude to property—the confusion or conflation of being and having, with its concomitant de-spiritualization of things as well as people, who become things in turn (Berdyaev *Slavery* 185). R. H. Tawney perhaps sums it up best:

> The burden of our civilization is not merely, as many suppose, that the product of industry is ill-distributed, or its conduct tyrannical, or its operation interrupted by embittered disagreements. It is that industry itself has come to hold a position of exclusive predominance among human interests, which no single interest, at least of all the provision of the material means of existence, is fit to occupy. That obsession by economic issues is as local and transitory as it is repulsive and disturbing. (Tawney, in Stout 284)

According to contemporary religious ethicist Jeffrey Stout, the language of the marketplace—consequentialism—has even entered our discourse about ethics and morals, so that internal goods, when they are recognized at all, "must be flattened into units of pleasure and pain, satisfaction and dissatisfaction, so that they can be absorbed into the calculus of utility" (Stout 286). Berdyaev turns to the work of poets and writers in order to find support for the struggle against the bourgeois spirit, and invokes in particular Fyodor Dostoevsky as muse in this regard. Indeed, Berdyaev claims to have found his calling in the famous parable "The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor" found in Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*. The Inquisitor, says Berdyaev, who condemns the returned Christ to the stake, stands not only for the authoritarian Church, but

even more fittingly he symbolizes the social movements such as Marxism which proclaim a forcible imposition of the utopian perfect society by means of "bread alone" (Spinka 213). Dostoevsky's religious thought is centered on the tragedy of freedom: man as a spiritual being is free, terribly free; he is free not only to save himself but to destroy himself by means of freedom. Berdyaev takes up this notion of terrible freedom, which, if "rightly used," can lead to "Godmanhood"—where human freedom unites with divine freedom.

What is this 'Godmanhood'? Sounding strangely foreign–if not blasphemous—to Western ears, the concept of deification is a familiar one in Eastern Orthodoxy, and is developed by Vladimir Solovyov as follows: "The idea of God-manhood means the overcoming of the self-sufficiency of man, in humanism, and at the same time the affirmation of the activity of man, of his highest dignity, of the divine in man" (Berdyaev *Russian Idea* 173). Moreover, the interpretation of Christianity in terms of Godmanhood is radically opposed to the juridical interpretation of the God-man relationship of the Western tradition, with its concomitant "juridical theory of redemption." Solovyov, and Berdyaev with him, does not think of salvation in terms of some "environmental" change (i.e., economic, cultural, or even sacramental), but rather in terms of transformed personalities. Yet this need not imply a turn to solipsism or Promethean individualism, nor to despair over a God that is "wholly other" and in the Protestant Theology of Crisis. The Russians have a different reaction to Kierkegaard than, say, Karl Barth, and this is because of the centrality of the notion of Godmanhood as well as *sobornost.*

Anarchism contra Nihilism

The goal of crude subjectivism is stasis; the absence of pain, the achievement of undisturbed repose. This stasis yields an all-embracing placidity that dissolves anger into love, action into contemplation, willfulness into passivity. The absence of emotional differentiation means the end of real emotion.
– Murray Bookchin

In his *Post-Scarcity* Anarchism, Murray Bookchin proclaims a new sensuousness based on possibility, a "pure Eros" (similar to that lionized by neo-Marxist Herbert Marcuse and feminist theologian Mary Daly) that must develop out of our "disintegrating consciousness"; yet one that must not lack a humanistic social content, for "if it remains crudely egoistic, it will simply follow the logic of an irrational social order and slip into a vicious nihilism" (Bookchin "Desire" 283). Here we are confronted with the strange but significant prospect of neo-anarchism denouncing nihilism. Certainly, anarchism must face its own past sins, along with those of its leftish rivals, and the vicious nihilism of the bomb tossing "deed" revolutionists must be countermanded in the name of brotherhood and the spirit of love. Vulgar anarchism of this sort reacts out of existential despair, true anarchism out of a legitimate concern for oppressor and oppressed—a concern for the spirit of the system that allows for material want and spiritual destitution. This does not mean that engagement is denied; on the contrary, Christian social anarchism requires constant and unrelenting engagement, albeit of a different sort, centered rather on specific liberatory acts than the violent deed. In her *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Sharon Welch confronts another kind of despair—the "cultured despair" of the Euro-American middle-class, which is assuaged not by action but by abundance, comfort, and the never-ending quest for fulfillment in material terms. This is dangerous, says Welch,

because it is profoundly ideological—masking the bad faith of abandoning social justice work for others when one is already a beneficiary of partial social change, and a contributor by complicity to the spirit of bourgeoisism that is fast becoming universal.

The ethic of creativeness put forth by Berdyaev and accepted by Bookchin and Welch is not a bourgeois idealization of aesthetics and "high culture." Rather, as Berdyaev says of the work of Gogol and Russian literature since his time, "it seeks truth and righteousness and teaches the bringing of truth into actual life…Russian literature was not born of a happy creative profession, but of suffering and the painful fate of mankind, out of the search for salvation for all men" (Clarke 45). Nowhere is this more evident than in the figure of Dostoevsky, who shunned the "landowner literature" of Tolstoy and Turgenev in favor of the literature of the underclass—of want, suffering, hope, fear, anger. What is remarkable about Dostoevsky is that despite the tragic circumstances and the terrible consequences of humanity's abuse of freedom which runs throughout his works, there is no feeling of hopelessness or despair, cultured or uncultured, the divine spark in humanity (Eckhart's *Seelenfünklein*) is always there.

Steeped in *sobornost,* Dostoevsky was much more socially and politically committed than Kierkegaard, the other great literary critic of modernity; for him the life of the Christian is not 'thrust upward' to the levels of the ideal but can be a visible and real possibility (Küng 238). Father Zosima, the author's mouthpiece on religion in *Karamazov,* notes that "Everyone of us is *undoubtedly responsible* for all men and everything on earth," thus it is absurd to demand a reckoning from God in this unjust world. Instead, "we are bidden to oppose he man-made injustice in the world through active love here and now in the solidarity of everyone with everyone else" [*sobornost*].

Opposed to destructive egocentricity as much as to vulgar statism, Dostoevsky's Christianity is an active, busy one; oriented to Jesus it is an attitude of mutual helping (cf. Kropotkin), giving, serving, sparing, and forgiving. A transformative-creative love, it has not only an individual but a socio-political dimension as well, although Dostoevsky (unlike Tolstoy) offers no pat solutions in terms of politics and education. Hans Küng says: "The discourses by Father Zosima preach freedom, equality, fraternity, but to a freedom that leads neither to (a new) slavery [like Nietzsche's Will to Power or Marx's Dictatorship of the Proletariat] nor to suicide [like Schopenhauer's philosophy, and Tolstoy at times], an equality based on the spiritual dignity of each person, and a fraternity that overcomes modern isolation" (239). Moreover, God is also *in* this world, God's mystery is *in* all things.[4] The Dostoevskian ethic is a world-shaping ethic that integrates eros and sexuality, understanding and feeling, heart and head. Binding oneself to God means freedom *in* the world (*pace* Bakunin, Marx, and Nietzsche); inner freedom is matched by the outer freedom to act *creatively* in the world (240).

God and/as Freedom
Berdyaev's ethic of creativeness rests in large part upon Dostoevskian premises and ideals, and on a certain conception of *freedom* in particular. Indeed, he accepted Nikolas Hartmann's expansion of the domain of ethics to include in it relations to every kind of value, whether cognitive or aesthetic: "Ethics embraces everything that is connected with human freedom" (*Destiny* 22). His philosophy is centered on humanity in concrete terms—both spirit *and* body—yet,

contra subjective idealism, "it is wrong to say that the world is created by the subject, for the world is created by God; but *God creates living creative subjects rather than objects or things"* (Berdyaev in Clarke 79, my emphasis). One could say, anticipating the work of John Macmurray, that God creates persons or "personalities" rather than "subjects." As an apostle, first and foremost of freedom, Berdyaev rejected absolute moral norms. Though, like most pacifist anarchists, he was repulsed by violence and war, he realized that in certain situation these were inevitable, in order to forestall greater human suffering, greater evil. Rejecting Cartesian dualism as "entirely wrong," Berdyaev put forth the personality as the entire image of humanity. Personality is not individualism; it presupposes a "going out from self" to another and to others—"it lacks air and is suffocated when left shut up in itself" (Clarke 91). Communion belongs essentially to the realm of freedom; communion means liberation from slavery. Again, we see this echoed in the work of John Macmurray, in whose philosophy of community *agency* is prior to subjectivity, and thought must always ultimately be *thought for action* (Macmurray xiii).[5]

In the ethics of creativeness, humanity is "redeemed" from the Law in order to create: "The moral problems of life cannot be solved by an automatic application of universally binding rules… It is impossible to say that in the same circumstances one ought always and everywhere to act in the same way" (Clarke 135). Law, says Berdyaev, while necessary for our sinful world, is not the source of ethics but rather a by-product, and must be ceaselessly transcended, and this new conception of ethics changes the way we view the battle against evil: evil is now to be transfigured creatively, not simply crushed out. This ethics of exuberance—of more life—is directed always towards others as well as the self, and even to the cosmos which it seeks to transfigure; fired by imagination, the envisioning of different and better lives, the imagination of the perfect kingdom must not tempt us, says Berdyaev to enforce it at all costs—enforced perfection is the kingdom of the Grand Inquisitor. The "tragedy" of ethics for Berdyaev thus becomes, not the battle of good and evil, but the conflict between one good and another, between competing moral visions that cannot be simply resolved. The ethics of creativeness is not without incumbent risks, indeed, it is in some sense defined by *risk*: for though creativeness more than anything else, he says, is reminiscent of humanity's vocation before the Fall, since human nature is sinful, creativeness can be distorted and permeated by sin, and thus may be evil.

Even with all the risks, says Berdyaev, we must put our faith in creative freedom. One saving grace is the power of love, which transforms the ethic of creativeness, though only if love is regarded as a value in itself and not as a means of salvation (*Destiny* 178). Moreover, "the ethics of creativeness calls for actual, concrete realization of truth, goodness, spirituality, for a real transformation of life and not for a symbolic and conventional realization of the good through ascetic practices, good works, an so on." The "fundamental Christian truth" of creativity has been deeply obscured and distorted, says Berdyaev, in history; the Church itself has denied creativity in favor of renunciation, personal purification, asceticism, purely personal salvation, humility, and self-abnegation, so that creation has been regarded as either irrelevant or even sinful. This creates a "false humanism" in which God is shut out (either denied or made wholly Other), and makes "man" the measure of all things, which, according to Berdyaev, can lead only to a vulgar

aesthetics of art for art's sake. "All true creativity is a divine-human process—a divine call and a human answer—not in slavish obedience to a dictate or 'blueprint from heaven', but as a divine-human response out of unlimited freedom to a divine-human summons" (Clarke 97). The creative process of life is necessary not for salvation, but for the sake of the Kingdom of God, and for the transfiguration of the world. Berdyaev recognized that the problems in culture and society cannot be ignored by Christians withdrawing into a cultural, spiritual, and moral desert (cf. Welch's "cultured despair"), living without creative thought and action: the call to create need not have the blessing of any institution, religious or political. Berdyaev sought to transcend Western European humanism, which, for all its gains, had run its course, and degenerated into the dry individualism which is the enslaving of humans to objects. Humanism without God, a God who is freedom, becomes vulgar materialism, contradicting its original aims; any new or revived humanism must be based on creative wisdom rather than objective knowledge.

Welch's Ethic of Risk

The spiritual world, the higher part of man's being is rejected altogether, dismissed with a sort of triumph, even hatred. The world has proclaimed the reign of freedom, especially of late, but what do we see in this freedom of theirs? Nothing but slavery and self-destruction.
– Father Zosima (Dostoeveky, *The Brothers Karamazov*)

Sharon Welch, in *A Feminist Ethic of Risk,* takes up Berdyaev's challenge by constructing an ethical and theological vision out of the voices of oppression, one that provides a challenge of an ethics of liberation to the non-poor and non-oppressed of the West. Like Berdyaev, Welch puts forth a theology of divine immanence; a richly textured understanding of human empowerment through the transformative-creative love of self, others, and life itself. Welch proclaims the joy that arises, not out of certainty of victory, but out of a love of life even in the most compromising and difficult circumstances. Love is not to be understood as passive acceptance, however: not to resist is "the death of the imagination, the death of caring, the death of the ability to love… [and as such] we lose the ability to imagine strategies of resistance and ways of sustaining each other in the long struggle for justice" (Welch 20).

Welch grounds her study in the strategic risk-taking of black women writers, whose creativity is meaningful action in the understanding that victory is a distant goal. Those of us working in and out of the Euro-American tradition are so concerned with *telos* and certainty that without a specific utopia, we tend to do nothing, falling into the cultured despair that is apathy and cynicism in one. Yet we have also seen the dangers of deterministic utopian revolutionism, which often sets means (and thus, ethics) to one side. Welch follows Michel Foucault in refusing to set up an alternative system or truth; as a "specific intellectual" she gives an alternative politics of truth—an alternative story for what Jeffrey Stout would call moral *bricolage*.[6] The specific acts of these other voices challenge us directly to rethink our own truths and values. In short, says Welch, responsible action must be re-defined as not the certain achievement of desired ends, but the creation of a matrix in which future actions are possible: "the creation of the conditions of possibility for desired changes" (20)—which is enabled by participation in an extensive community.

Freedom and Difference

Part of the problem we face, says Welch, is the dangerous and frequently made equation of otherness with opposition; the "denial of difference" seems to be a particular construction of the utopian imagination (35). If it is imagined that apart of the socio-political good is uniformity, or the absence of tension, then difference *per se* comes to be suspected: "Difference and disagreement are then viewed as the product of either ignorance or ill-will, unfortunate or dangerous factors to be eliminated." Difference comes to be equated with potential chaos (i.e., anarchy), which is antithetical to the achievement of order and stability. According to Welch, the (inevitable) chaos of interdependence or mutuality (contra the homogeneity of communism) can be viewed as itself positive—"as the fertile matrix of human creativity, leading to richer political and intellectual constructions as the insights and needs of various groups are fully taken into account." Moreover, the traditional valorization of certainty and absoluteness reveals itself in a theology that valorizes absolute power through its concept of an omnipotent (judicial) God, a theology that often has the effect of the political glorification of domination (111).

Rather than stress human humility, the idea of an omnipotent an sovereign God assumes that absolute power can be a good, when according to Welch (and Berdyaev, Bookchin), it can never be, as it assumes that the ability to act regardless of the response of others is a good rather than a sign of alienation form others (111). Augustine's theology of politics destroys the notion held by earlier thinkers like John Chrysostom of the moral freedom to rule oneself that is part of the gospel message. Welch calls this a victory for the "erotics of domination," in which oppressive power gains much of its force through the claim of submission to a greater (moral/religious/rational) purpose; it is a victory for the spirit of bourgeois power, and can be seen in the Christian tradition, liberal democracy, and authoritarian fascism and communism. "The claim of moral purpose blinds both oppressor and those who acquiesce to oppression" (114).

Christian Anarchism and the Ethics of the Small Act

In terms of ethics then, freedom and creativeness are central features, bound together with the subject-in-relation, the agent or personality. In this age where the old paradigms have come under suspicion, the danger of nihilism, cognitive or ethical, is a real danger, and any kind of anarchism of the "deed" variety is untenable, not least because power is much less obvious, more disparate, and more diffuse than in the times of Alexander II, King Umberto, and President McKinley. With Jean Bethke Elshtain, we can dream a dream not of "solemn deed doers but of zestful act takers, experimenting with new possibilities playfully but from a deep seriousness of purpose" (Welch 47). Jacques Ellul is another proponent of the small act: "If we take in enough of them and are vigilant," he says, "we can check the omnipotence of the state…For the enemy today is not the central state but the omnipotence and omnipresence of administration" (16). Even more, we could add, it is the omnipresence of the bourgeois spirit of *homo economicus* and consumption for consumption's sake. Small acts or "partial successes" offer concrete models of what is ought on a larger scale; offering glimpses of an equitable social structure, enlarging the moral imagination, these may encourage others to take the risk of developing their own strategies of resistance. Again, this is not an ethic based in dogma of certainty, nor one striving for homogeneity, but one directed by the moral discourses at our disposal, particularly the gospel message as it has been interpreted through the eyes of freedom and creativeness, and of a love which is not in the spirit of self-sacrifice but of radiance, as in the love of God. Liberal critics are quite right in fearing the leftist tyranny of the people; but they are wrong in ascribing the blame to revolutionary fervor, when it is the result of the loss of revolutionary love in the isolation and elitism of a "vanguard" who claim to know what is good for all, and in the greater one-sided emphasis on eco-political power.

Conclusions

For god is nothing other than the eternally creative source of our relational power, our common strength, a god whose movement is to empower, bringing us into our own together, a god whose name in history is love—provided we mean by "love" not just simply a sentiment or unfocused feeling, but rather that which is just, mutually empowering, and co-creative.
– Carter Heyward

Jacques Ellul in *Anarchism and Christianity* claims that the author of Genesis (the one known to biblical scholars as "J") finds our human fault in the attitude of wanting to become gods knowing good and evil instead of *being with God* in the enjoyment of life and the pleasure of creating (97). The bourgeoisism of Nikolai Berdyaev overwhelms our lives; the preoccupation with consumption, status, and success engenders unhappiness: "We are left alone, naked and scornful, mutually accusing one another, toiling for ourselves, in creation and procreation sowing death, fighting for domination or accepting domination in fear" (Ellul 97); and at the same time these preoccupations blind us to the injustices of the destitute of our own and the oppressed of other nations, whose oppression is in some sense the result of our complicity in the spirit of our own culture. Like Esau, we have sold our birthright for a mess of pottage, and the pottage is not even that tasty; whereas, like Jacob, we can only come into the blessing, into more life, by struggling for life at all turns, wrestling in the night with forces seen and unseen.[7] Christian anarchism brings a critical dimension to moral discourse which is wary of the pieties of traditional sources of power, whether they be institutional, cognitive, or spiritual.

Moreover, the God of Christian anarchism and the creative ethics of risk and freedom is not only transcendent and life giving, but also "fragile"—as we are constituted by "it," "it" is sustained by us. Such fragility is not a lack in God, but is intrinsic to creative power, which elicits responses from others as it works. God should not be thought of as King or Lord, for as Jacques Ellul puts it, God's is a "self-limited omnipotence," and this is not through caprice or fancy but because everything else would be in contradiction with His very being, which is love—creative, free love. God in this sense limits Himself so that humans can be more like God, so that humans can, in *sobornost,* share in Godmanhood. A theology of immanence as propounded by Sharon Welch and Nikolai Berdyaev provides the benefits of a theology of transcendence without the social costs of such. It involves an imperative for ethical action grounded in love and accountability. Love makes no sense without freedom, and freedom without love is a chimera.

Notes

1. The French poet Charles Péguy also makes this distinction between poverty (*pauvreté*) and destitution (*misère*), saying that the latter cannot in any circumstances be tolerated in human society. This is a prioritization of oppression in terms of the totality of human suffering, not a denial of the former type.

2. They proclaim, in a frighteningly unequivocal defense of the Reign of Terror: "As in France in 1793, so today in Germany the carrying through of the strictest centralization is the task of the really revolutionary party" (Bookchin "Post-Scarcity" 208).

3. Such rhetoric "fail[s] to take into account the cultural and spiritual revolt that is taking place [and *must* take place] along with the economic struggle" (Bookchin "Listen" 230).

4. Indeed, the Russian *starets* sounds in some instances like a New England Transcendentalist: "Love every ray of God's light… Love animals… [d]o not trouble their joy… don't deprive them of their happiness" (Dostoevsky 294). Compare Walt Whitman's effusions ("Love the earth and sun and animals…") in *Leaves of Grass*. The connection between neo-anarchism and environmentalism is a close one, though not explored in this paper.

5. "Against the assumption that the Self is an isolated individual, I have set the view that the Self is a *person*, and that personal existence is *constituted* by the relation of persons. Yet even the 'agent self' treated singularly is a logical abstraction, and can exist only as a community of personal agents" Macmurray 17).

6. This term is used by Jeffrey Stout to signify "the process in which one begins with bits and pieces of received linguistic material, arranges some of them into a structured whole, leaves others to the side, and ends up with a moral language one proposes to use" (Appendix of Terms to *Ethics After Babel*). Such, says Stout, does not unfold an original essence or apply an unchanging inheritance to new situations: "It works with different, and at times competing, sources of normative insight - biblical, philosophical, empirical, and broadly experimental" (169).

7. Miguel de Unamuno, whom I see as a kindred spirit to Berdyaev, if ultimately more strictly Kierkegaardian, and (hence?) more pessimistic: "My religion is to seek the truth in life and life in the truth, even though I know I will not find it while I live. My religion is to struggle incessantly and tirelessly with the mystery; my religion is to wrestle with God from the break of dawn until the fell of night, as they say Jacob wrestled with him… I wish to fight my battle without thought of victory" (Unamuno 211). For Harold Bloom, literary critic and biblical commentator, Jacob is perhaps the greatest biblical character (at least in terms of an aesthetic creation)—he has the "cunning of a survivor" but does not escape suffering: wrestling for Life, struggling for every triumph, risking himself for the Blessing, in winning it he still loses personal happiness. For Bloom, Jacob is the character most like J's Yahweh—a truly 'theomorphic' protagonist (65).

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