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Foundations in faith

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Religion, the dominion of the human mind; Property, the dominion of human needs; and Government, the dominion of human conduct, represent the stronghold of man's enslavement and all the horrors it entails. Religion! How it dominates man's mind, how it humiliates and degrades his soul. God is everything, man is nothing, says religion. But out of that nothing God has created a kingdom so despotic, so tyrannical, so cruel, so terribly exacting that naught but gloom and tears and blood have ruled the world since gods began. Anarchism rouses man to rebellion against this black monster.

(Emma Goldman 2008)

Early anarchists predominantly emerged in Christian countries. When they commented on established religion, they commented on Christianity. Alexander Berkman (2003: 61) writes: "You know that the Christian Church, like all other churches, has always been on the side of the masters, against the people. . . . The church has persecuted people for their opinions, imprisoned, and killed them." The church cast its future with ruling powers, rather than with commoners. Consequently, the church has been the right hand of government, as Berkman (2003: 40–41) observes:

OBEY! That is the eternal cry of church and school, no matter how vile the tyrant, no matter how oppressive and unjust "law and order." OBEY! For if you will cease obedience to authority you might begin to think for yourself! That would be most dangerous to "law and order," the greatest misfortune for church and school. For then you would find out that everything they taught you was a lie, and was only for the purpose of keeping you enslaved, in mind and body, so that you should continue to toil and suffer and keep quiet.

Religious structures – the dogmatic power of the Christian church, and its link with oppressive governments – have led many anarchists to reject religion. Yet every religion supports anarchy in religious teachings, even Christianity, providing a critical foundation for spiritually inclined anarchists such as Leo Tolstoy.

In contrast with conventional religious institutions, scriptures provide a wealth of anarchist inspiration well known to anarchists such as Berkman and Proudhon.

