



## **Anarchy and Christianity**

*Jacques Ellul , Geoffrey William Bromiley (Translator)*

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Jacques Ellul blends politics, theology, history, and exposition in this analysis of the relationship between political anarchy and biblical faith. On the one hand, suggests Ellul, anarchists need to understand that much of their criticism of Christianity applies only to the form of religion that developed, not to biblical faith. Christians, on the other hand, need to look at the biblical texts and not reject anarchy as a political option, for it seems closest to biblical thinking. Ellul here defines anarchy as the nonviolent repudiation of authority. He looks at the Bible as the source of anarchy (in the sense of nondomination, not disorder), working through the Old Testament history, Jesus' ministry, and finally the early church's view of power as reflected in the New Testament writings. "With the verve and the gift of trenchant simplification to which we have been accustomed, Ellul lays bare the fallacy that Christianity should normally be the ally of civil authority." - John Howard Yoder

## Anarchy and Christianity Details

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# From Reader Review *Anarchy and Christianity* for online ebook

## **Beth says**

I'm dying to read this book!

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## **peter says**

I had high hopes for this book. Unfortunately, they were higher than Ellul could realistically meet. He states both in the introduction and conclusion that his aim is neither to Christianize Anarchism nor to Anarchize Christianity. Rather, he seeks throughout this slim volume to point to the early Christian hostility to authority and to the notion that Christians and Anarchists face the same enemies and nemeses.

His hostility to Islam is disconcerting, as he presents himself as someone learned in its analysis. Why include it at all, if the aim is to explore the compatibility of Christianity and Anarchism? I frankly wish he hadn't mentioned it at all rather than betraying a semi-triumphalist and unfortunately xenophobic tendency through its mention.

As to the type of Anarchism espoused, he mentions an affinity for Anarcho-Syndicalism. This is sensible, as it's quite close to the social relationship of the apostles in Acts. Still, he later veers closer to something like Ammon Hennacy's "One Man Revolution" idea in advocating conscientious objection to all of modern society. Ellul's idea is somewhat more social than Hennacy's inasmuch as he recommends creating "margin societies" or autonomous collectives outside the reach of the State. This type of resignation, however, helps nobody outside the reach of the collective. It is a kind of social boycott which can assuage the conscience of its participants but does little to nothing to help those still afflicted by the State writ large.

Finally, his rejection of any violence whatsoever also leads Ellul to reject Liberation Theology. He betrays a position of privilege here. The pacifism to which he subscribes is the same kind endorsed by White America during the Civil Rights movement: it is more like passivity than like non-violent resistance. It seems odd to accuse someone like Ellul of harboring anti-revolutionary sympathies, but no more odd than actually finding them in a text called "Anarchy and Christianity".

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## **Glauber Ribeiro says**

How could i have forgotten about Jacques Ellul? For sure i need to go back and re-read all his stuff. In this short book, he does his best to introduce Anarchists and Christians to one another. It's not a deep treatment, but a pleasant read and a refreshing contrast to so much dreck that has been sold as Christian thinking.

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## **Eduardo Folster says**

It was a great reading.

Although I have some disagreements (not related to the core of his essay), I recommend it, indeed.

Some important points:

First, Jacques Ellul doesn't want to equate Anarchy with Christianity. He is clear in the two points that makes Christianity different from Anarchy: (1) the biblical view of human nature and (2) salvation/faith in Jesus Christ.

Second, he argues that the BIBLICAL Christianity maintains the same basic goal of Anarchy: no domination (authoritarianism/power over others).

Third, contemporary Christians can positively be challenged from Anarchy's objections to Christianity. Because they may turn to the Bible to find out how it really sees power, authority, and domination. In this sense, they would reach a more biblical view of these issues and a less traditional/religious (taken-for-granted) one.

Finally, Ellul offers a (sometimes fresh) reading of some texts from the Hebrew Bible and from the New Testament. Although he is quite brief in form, he takes a comprehensive and serious approach/scope. He reads the biblical texts contextually in its literary form and within its historical context. If you do not agree with any of his interpretations, remember to offer a better suggestion in the same level (reading the biblical texts in its literary form and within its historical context, and not through traditional religious lenses that obfuscate the whole of the biblical context).

May this reading challenge you as it challenged me, in a very positive way. In the end, may we treat one another as Jesus would do it. Not resorting to power and authoritarian means, but to love.

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### **Connor says**

While I find it difficult to agree with everything Jacques Ellul presents in this book, it generally presents an excellent argument for the political attitude he suggests to Christians. He begins by first defining anarchy as a total rejection of violence and violence-enabling authority. Additionally, Ellul doesn't refer to the chaotic, rebellion-oriented regimes that often come to our minds when we think about anarchy. Instead he offers a rather peaceful view of this political philosophy, much more aligned with pacifism than traditional anarchy.

In the second part of the book, Ellul directs his attention towards atheistic anarchists who reject religious authority, assuring them that it is possible to remain an anarchist and a Christian. To support his argument, Ellul shows biblical support for God's disdain for earthly political power throughout the Old Testament, Jesus' ministry, the book of 1 Peter, Paul's ministry, and John the Apostle's revelation. As a lay theologian, Ellul is shockingly deft. His commentary is very refined, drawing inspiration especially from the German theologian Karl Barth. His humility is staggering as well—he accepts right off the bat that he does not hold his anarchic views to be the only viable political option for Christians, but simply one worth considering.

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### **Shawn Birss says**

I gave it five stars to acknowledge that it is essential reading for a Christian interested in anarchism. However, it is actually pretty sloppy as theology, religious philosophy, and as politics. He even wastes a few pages on anti-vaccination garbage. But it is short, and universally recognized as an important work on the subject. It influences, or is at least acknowledged, in almost all other books I've ever read on the subject. So, not very good, but an important part of the whole.

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### **Timothy Lindhagen-våge says**

Jacques Ellul started the book by saying in its introduction that Anarchy is an impossibility. My reaction was a variation of shipwrecked emotions, however, upon finalizing the book, Ellul marinated my mentality back into an inevitable conclusion of anarchistic devotion to the god that makes Law natural to humanity, including those who do not believe in Him.

I was always under the impression that only Christians could live in Anarchist societies (as do the Amish, Quakers and many Mennonites, as agrees Tolstoy and Voltaire. This book only mentions Christian perspective of the theory of Anarchism under Biblical circumstances and does not speak for others. My recommendation for this book is nearly urgent for all Christians should pick it up and read it, whereas anyone else in today's society would only find room to mock it for absurdities that don't impress their stubbornness. After all, Christianity is a personal relationship with God. It is no institution nor corporation as even most Christians believe that it is.

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### **Raleigh says**

Great analysis of Jesus' message and pre-Constantinian christianity. Shows how truly following Jesus looks a lot like anarchism.

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### **Northpapers says**

Sabbath Book #13 for 2018.

The faith handed to me in my youth was closely associated with the political right. I could not comprehend how a professing Christian could be anything but Republican. As a young adult in Chicago, I grew uncomfortable with Republican hypocrisies, and because of my involvement with the right as a publicist, I lost my faith. Disinterested in legislating morality and skeptical of politics in general, I shifted to Libertarianism.

But ten years ago, I followed my renewed faith into lives that are oppressed and dehumanized by the right and by market forces, and although my past mistakes kept me from adopting any firm ideology, I began leaning toward liberalism in its contemporary sense. In the meantime, I developed significant friendships with anarchists, and often found myself in agreement with their perspectives.

In the latest election, I was disgusted by the manipulations and appeals aimed at Christians by the Democratic party. I also felt a deep unease at corruptions within the party and its inevitably deep ties with the kinds of power it purports to resist or control.

Despite my activity on local and national issues (I demonstrate and I interview people I admire for a podcast and I have the numbers of all my local and national officials in my phone), I am deeply unsatisfied with my own understanding of politics. So I'm on this quest to discover a healthy relation between my faith and my political life.

Jacques Ellul's *Anarchy and Christianity* is a thrilling and short piece that explores two apparently opposed movements and encourages thoughtful conversation between them. Which I found a powerful and promising suggestion, regardless of my many disagreements with the steps Ellul takes to get there.

Of course, the primary problem, outside of deep-set and unquestioned antipathy between anarchists and Christians, is the fact that both terms are large umbrellas with numerous offshoots, deep internal disagreements, and varying dogmas. So Ellul does what he can. He defines the sort of anarchy he finds relevant to the conversation (the non-violent kind, which I find non-negotiable in light of the Gospels) and appropriately explores the Christian scriptures to discern the views of Christ and his early followers.

He states that his aim is just to show that of the available political positions, anarchism best aligns with Christianity. Ellul avoids many difficulties by limiting his scope. He does not hope to make anarchists into Christians or Christians into anarchists. He does not play out the conversation, but merely suggests that one should take place.

His case, especially from the Hebrew Scriptures and the life of Jesus, is compelling. He insightfully interprets Jesus's posture and teaching in regard to political powers, even unto the point of death. He demonstrates, however briefly, how the early church followed this example until it was corrupted by alliances with those powers.

His work with other New Testament writers is more challenging for me. I find his interpretation of Romans 13 (a chapter I find very difficult in view of what surrounds it) unsatisfying. While his view of Revelation is compelling, it's also embattled, extremely political, and removed from most of the interpretations of the book I've previously explored. I look forward to further explorations.

I didn't give this book four stars because I agreed with its content, although I found much of it resonant. I give it high praise because of the lines of thinking it provokes for me. I'm looking forward to learning more, both from Ellul and from the scriptures he evokes so passionately.

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### **Diego Bonadiman says**

Só voadora no peito tanto de cristãos quanto de anarquistas.

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### **Jared Schumacher says**

Very, Very Interesting. In many ways a way of speaking of the politics of Jesus from a slightly different angle. Mostly, this will be a good resource for interpretation of Christian's relationship to power.

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## **W. Littlejohn says**

A demoralizing disappointment, even though my expectations had been lowered ahead of time by Brad Belschner. Offers very little in terms of a sketch of what anarchy really means and looks like in practice, and his walk through the Bible is so oversimplistic and selective that I was embarrassed for him. Of course, I recognize he's trying to write a brief summary, and so he has to simplify, but there are two different kinds of simplicity. In one, the author is drawing on such a wealth of understanding that although his presentation is small, one recognizes that it is just the tip of the iceberg, supported underneath by a massive foundation lying under the surface. That's how O'Donovan writes. Or, the simplicity can be all that the author has to offer, so that when you try to dig deeper, you see that all you have is a thin, brittle piece of ice that can't bear any strain. That's how Ellul writes in this book at least. The only interpretations he offered that I found convincing were ones that I had already been convinced of elsewhere.

I'm also disappointed because there are also two kinds of anarchist/pacifists, and one kind (the Ellul kind) makes the other kind look bad. One can argue, with some persuasiveness, that we should not exercise dominion and violent judgment because this right belongs to God alone, and he does not delegate it to us. Or one can blindly insist, as Ellul does, that we should not exercise dominion and violent judgment because God doesn't; he is a God of love, not wrath, a God who never wishes to be called Lord or Master; and we should imitate him. And this is just watery and unbiblical, and makes sensible pacifism look dumb.

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## **Jaap says**

In this 100 page essay Jacques Ellul explores the relationship between Anarchism (the theory, not the violent revolution) and Christianity. He sees many similarities and shows that many texts in the Bible can be read in a way that supports the anarchist point of view. I really liked the essay and although Ellul's theological point of views are sometimes questionable (in my laymen opinion) and although he does not provide a clear path forward I believe this is a valuable contribution to progressive christian thinking.

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## **Jessica says**

I was surprised at how readable this book was, and it was very interesting to hear someone expand on a lot of things I've thought about myself. Ellul doesn't go too deep, and some of his exegesis seems a bit questionable, but for the most part it was interesting reading and gave me plenty of things to think about. He discusses nonviolence and nonvoting and devotes quite a bit of time toward demonstrating that Jesus and the early Christians did not support political powers and hierarchies. His intent is not to convert anarchists to Christianity or Christians to anarchy, but just to demonstrate that the two beliefs can be held simultaneously without self-contradiction.

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## **paul says**

This is a very honest read and is one of the freshest books on Christianity I have read. The author outlines the innate incompatibility of most forms of anarchy and Christianity and why most anarchists would not accept any Christian as a practicing Anarchist. On the premise of that predicament, Ellul barrels forward covering

thousands of years of history and exegetes numerous scriptures, I believe all key scriptures both in the Hebrew Bible and the Greek Bible, that refer to authority or are used/have been taught as so by theologians, scholars, laypersons, and church leaders.

With such a blatant title, the book does not limit itself and touches various components to the Christian faith and life. For example faith itself and it's crucial role in Christian Anarchy, the relationship with God and humans to God, Jesus' figure and teachings, and freedom itself and how all this reconciles in a proclaimed Christian's life when confronted by authority; specifically political authority.

To capture more of the takeaways from this book I'll need to read it with others and discuss it, and most importantly, attempt to live a few of the practices mentioned. I recommend the read simply to challenge your general and traditional view of both Christianity and Anarchy. If you do, expect a new breath of interesting air that may encourage you to reframe how you view politics and authority, even if you are not a Christian or Anarchist.

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