



## **The Subversion of Christianity**

*Jacques Ellul , Geoffrey William Bromiley (Translator)*

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Pointing to the many contradictions between the Bible and the practice of the church, Jacques Ellul asserts that what we today call Christianity is actually far removed from the revelation of God.

Successive generations have reinterpreted Scripture and modeled it after their own cultures, thus moving society further from the truth of the original gospel. The church also perverted the gospel message, for instead of simply doing away with pagan practice and belief, it reconstituted the sacred, set up its own religious forms, and thus resacralized the world.

Ellul develops several areas in which this perversion is most obvious, including the church's emphasis on moralism and its teaching in the political sphere. The heart of the problem, he says, is that we have not accepted the fact that Christianity is a scandal; we attempt to make it acceptable and easy -- and thus pervert its true message.

## The Subversion of Christianity Details

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# From Reader Review The Subversion of Christianity for online ebook

## Bart Breen says

Recognizing where Christianity has been Subverted carries the seeds of how it will be Reclaimed

Rarely have I taken as long to read a book as I have in working through this one. The content demanded reading, re-reading and pauses to consider what was being said. Make no mistake, this is a book that requires careful and attentive reading to hear what it is saying as well as to discern what it is not saying.

Jacques Ellul was a prolific writer in his native French and more of his works are being translated into English. He is known to most as a philosopher and in particular for his deterministic approach toward technology and its impact upon individuals and society. Ellul however, was a Christian Anarchist too, who had a great deal to say about personal faith, the true nature of the church and the societal, cultural and historical changes that have taken place. The term Christian Anarchist is one that remains grossly misunderstood by many. This is not anarchism in the sense of 18th and 19th century political anarchism. This is in many ways a return to early Christianity and the early churches recognition that relationship and a personal walk with Christ was far more to be desired and in fact was antithetical to a walk based upon obligation and external social pressures toward conformity with an established norm. At its heart it is a return to Christ's direct teaching and strong aversion to the religion of the Pharisees of his day who focused upon the external appearance and had nothing to do with the Kingdom Christ had to establish.

It is really from this that the entire premise of this book springs. Ellul draws a stark distinction between the faith Christ delivered once and for all (Christianity) and what it has become over time due to the influences of Greek Philosophy, Roman Law and many other societal trends over time and in the present age (Christendom.) Christendom, Ellul states, has largely departed from, and indeed in many instances is diametrically opposite that which Christ originally taught and modeled.

Keep in mind that this book was originally written in 1984 in French. This translation of Ellul's 40th book came in 1986. Despite the more than 25 years that have passed since it's being written and the great upheavals and exponential technological change, this message is still very timely and contemporary.

The book itself moves in broad themes to demonstrate the radical changes in the understanding of the basics of Christianity. After initially defining the contradictions that he observed in the first chapter Ellul then moves systematically through several influences outside of the core teaching and relationship model of Christianity that he sees as particularly key. The contradictions noted include,

- \* the denial of progressive revelation in theory but the practice of progressive changes of interpretation.
- \* the ongoing struggle of grace and law and the creative and myriad ways that grace is diminished while law is promoted.
- \* the continued synthesis of cultural and societal values into the core of the Christian religion which in the end comes to reflect society rather than being a change agent within it.
- \* the foundation of Christ's clear teachings and simple message undermined by Greek Philosophy, Roman Law and turned into an "ism".

\* the clear teachings of Christ rationalized away in favor of an intellectually consistent, but content-wise opposite message watered down with the original message cast aside.

With the problem thus defined, Ellul moves on to address how the current forms of Christendom have been arrived upon. The principle elements focused upon is Christianity's historic alignment with political power in direct contradiction to the teachings of Christ about such compromise and use of earthly means to attempt to bring about spiritual results. In a very cursory manner, Ellul covers many of the elements of the paganizing of the church that are covered in far greater detail in Frank Viola and George Barna's Pagan Christianity. Included in these forms is the tendency to moralize or move to legalistic checklists to define how true a person's religion is or may be. The emphasis upon money and wealth in the western church context along with the alignment of Christendom with different forms of governmental theory to prove, after the fact, the validity of the current societally in-vogue economic theory whether that be LaissezFaire capitalism or Marxism, to give but two.

From here then Ellul begins to paint in broad themes through chapters that continue to build upon the foundation laid. He moves from forms within Christendom illustrating his point and then to some of the overlying societal influences that have shaped Christendom into what it is today in the western world especially.

Most of the chapters can actually stand on their own as essays on each individual element addressed. The issues touched up include:

- \* The artificial distinction between the "sacred" and "secular" in institutional religion.
- \* The false equation of Christianity with Morality.
- \* The role of women within society and the church.
- \* The historical influence of Islam back upon Christendom.
- \* The perversion of Christendom intertwined with political power.
- \* The progression of Nihilism in response to societal woes and the themes of it within organized Christianity.
- \* The heart of why Christianity as a religion is diametrically opposite to historical Christianity as delivered by Christ and received by the early saints.
- \* The influence of "Dominions and Powers" behind the scenes. (This has to be read to be understood ... it's not what Christians today, would expect it to be.)
- \* A conclusion that recognizes that despite the broad trends, a remnant or core still remains of faithful people who "get it" and walk outside of and despite the broader perversions and trends that plague organized religion.

Ellul has proven to be an extremely challenging and beneficial read for me. In fact a read that can be said to be pivotal in many understandings that I am currently relearning. Make no mistake, though, Ellul is not a traditional or an easy read. I found elements of things that I'm not in complete agreement with as well. For example, Ellul holds to a form of Universalism and some of his examples of the Trinity come close (or

maybe even cross into) modalism. Ellul's personal history as a young Marxist before he came to Christ as well as the context he writes from with the church in France as his experiential model don't line up with everything "neatly" that an evangelical American can relate directly to perhaps.

All these things aside however, this is a powerful read. I strongly recommend it.

5 stars.

bart breen

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### **Frankie Della Torre says**

Jacques Ellul's thesis is simple: God's revelation to the world in Christ has been infiltrated and warped into something it's not. The result of this infiltration is: Christendom. The Christian religion is synonymous with "Christendom." In its inherent form, the revelation of God in Christ is not a religion; it is, rather, the end of religion. It is anti-religious (hence why the first Christ followers were labelled "atheists" - they did not believe in any of the sacred festivals and superstitions of the pagans). Religions seek to pin down sacred places, times, festivals, practices, and rituals. Christianity, and Judaism before it, reveal that there is no such thing. Nothing in this world, in this human sphere, is synonymous with God. There is an "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and man, said Kierkegaard and Barth. It is this theological project that Ellul picks up.

From Ellul's perspective, the Christian religion is not only not to be identified with the revelation of God in Christ; but, more severely, the revelation of God in Christ announces the end of Christianity, and not just Christianity, but all religion, and not just all religion, but the whole world. Nothing escapes the judgment of God sentenced upon the world. All is summed up in Christ. Christianity, Jacques Ellul thinks, is not the revelation of God. Taking up the critiques of the institution we call "Christianity" which started with Kierkegaard, Overbeck, and Barth, Ellul says that the history of Christianity is a hoax.

"God's revelation has nothing whatever to do with morality. Nothing. Absolutely nothing," says Jacques Ellul. What, then, does God's revelation have to do with—in the sphere of human conduct and action? "Love and freedom," Ellul responds. As he says, "The great mutation is that we have been freed in Jesus Christ... This freedom does not mean doing anything at all [as if "anything goes," as caricatures of postmodernism go]. It is freedom of love. Love, which cannot be regulated, categorized, or analyzed into principles or commandments, takes the place of law. The relationship with others is not one of duty but of love." The difference between love and morality, freedom and law, cannot be overstated. Jesus did not come to give us a morality. The Gospels do not give us morality. Paul's letters are not morality. The Scriptures do not give morally universal categories that fit into a system. In fact, the revelation of God is radically against morality, says Ellul. What the Gospels and Epistles give us is something that resists articulation that fit moral terms completely. We are given, instead, "the proclamation of grace, the declaration of pardon, and the opening up of life to freedom—which are the exact opposite of morals. God reveals a model of life that is very free, that involves constant risks, that is constantly renewed—not repetitive. The behavior we are called to surpasses all morality which is shown to be an obstacle to encounter with the living God. What we are called to is a way of being that is forgiving, gracious, merciful, passionate about justice (redemptive justice, not retributive justice)—and not a list of commands and rules that are unchanging and binding to all persons in all circumstances. Indeed, there is something about love that ruptures moral standards altogether. Love came to us, broke established rules and cultural regulations ("this man eats with sinners!"), got in trouble (to put it

lightly) with the authorities, and was crucified onto a tree by those in power. Suddenly, any thought of a “Christian” ethic becomes absurd. As Ellul says, “God himself frees us from morality and places us in the only true ethical situation, that of personal choice, of responsibility, of the invention and imagination that we must exercise if we are to find the concrete form of obedience to our Father.” What we have in the Old Testament commandments or in Paul’s admonitions, he thinks, are on the one hand, “the frontier between what brings life and what brings death,” and on the other hand, “examples, metaphors, analogies, or parables that incite us to invention.”

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## **Bob says**

Although I give this book 3 (maybe 4 stars) it is not for everyone. The author intent is to show how the church throughout history has consistently been led away from truly living out the gospel -- whether by outside forces or by the weight of its own success.

He is very careful about the charges that he makes against Christianity. His arguments are subtle, & Ellul is quick to acknowledge the hyperbole of those who criticize the faith from the outside. Nonetheless, he often finds a kernel of truth at the root of those criticisms. Ellul blames the worst of Christianity on it's subversion. He rightly points out that biblical revelation destroys the legitimacy of every other worldview & that a weakened & subverted Christianity provides a poor substitute, basically leaving us to ourselves.

Now you have to get past the things you may disagree with. The author does not believe that Satan is a person, when it comes to the physical organizing of the church he throws out the baby with the bathwater, 7 so on.

However he gives one many things to think about & there are sections that are simply brilliant. He does a wonderful job of differentiating between what is Holy & Sacred in the chapter entitled “Desacralization & Sacralization.” He states in another section that mysticism is not essentially Christian, in fact he says that in its final form it is more anti-Christian. His discussion here is important due to the trend among many Christians to gravitate towards the mystical.

In chapter 8 he brings out many significant insights as it relates to the heart of man & man’s fundamental problem. In one place he states, “We do not want grace. Fundamentally what we want is self-justification...I absolutely want to have and to hold faith. I want it to be mine. I want the choice of taking it or leaving it. ...Faith it does not belong to me. It is given, it makes me alive, it is not an object that I can take and set aside as I please...it grasps me and takes me...this is unacceptable to me”

Then speaking about freedom he states that what people want is simply not being subject to others, being able to have their own dreams or go where they want to go. But nothing more than this. People definitely do not want to take charge of their own lives and be responsible for what they do. This means, he says, that they do not really want freedom.

Anyway, in the end there is a lot of good stuff, it’s thought provoking & very insightful.

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## **James says**

Those who enjoy the focus on order and unity in Luc, Ferry, [The Wisdom of the Myths](#); Michael J. Harner, [Cave and Cosmos](#) will gain from this book by Ellul.

From the beginnings of the Christianity through modern day, the theological, political, economic, and military history is "the result of a primordial obsession with unity: the reduction of the diversity of the world to the one." Jacques Ellul sees our God as one of beginnings and revelation, not organization and institution: eppur si muove (yet it moves)

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## **A.J. Jr. says**

"I will simply recall that the subversion of Christianity has come through its letting itself be penetrated and seduced and led by the prince of this world." (Jacques Ellul, p. 180)

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## **Eric\_W says**

We read this book in our reading club several years ago. Ellul was a French philosopher who argues that in the 4th century the alliance of Christianity with the power of the state under Constantine essentially changed the very nature of Christianity and encouraged the development of authoritarian thinking as the church now had the power of the state to enforce orthodoxy.

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## **Andrew says**

I like Ellul and he's a competent and lucid debater. I think many of his arguments in this book fall into the same traps that plague just about every debate over the "real meaning" of Christianity. For Ellul, he takes passages and says "look what it clearly says here!" and at other times "this is what it says but the Holy Spirit/sense says we should actually understand it as saying..." Toward the end I was thinking the title is more apt as "The Subversion of the Reformation."

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## **Collin says**

Dense. It's a fascinating topic, but reading this book is like eating a sleeve of saltine crackers without

anything to drink. It's taking me quite a while to read because I can only stand a couple of pages at a time.

--update: I skimmed the penultimate chapter, skipped the last chapter altogether, and threw it away. I don't like the way the author writes PLUS I don't trust the translation (it was originally written in French), I don't like how self-absorbed the author is (only his interpretation could ever possibly be correct), I don't like the way he references other works. In short, it shouldn't have been nearly as hard to read as it was.

--update: I was re-reading my other book reviews and I discovered to my horror that I had already used the "like eating saltines" analogy for another book. So I'd like to retroactively amend this analogy to chewing dirt and wishing you had a glass of water to wash it down even though rationally you know that'd just mean you were eating mud.

--update: Randomly, Jacques Ellul gets criticized in Future Shock, which was written in 1970, for the "anti-technological rhetoric" of his earlier books, such as saying "The human being is no longer in any sense the agent of choice." Future Shock's criticism doesn't pertain to this book at all, that I can remember, but I thought it was fascinating/weird that he should be mentioned as someone "whose books are enjoying a campus vogue."

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## **Alex Stroshine says**

I read "The Subversion of Christianity" to gear up for the upcoming International Jacques Ellul Society Conference at Regent College. I have always found Ellul a challenging and difficult thinker but this (my fourth or fifth book of his) is a provocative exploration of ways Ellul believes Christianity has been distorted. Seeking to ground the faith in Scripture (though here Ellul suggests doubts about the veracity of some biblical passages), Ellul is dismissive of tradition and laments the syncretism and moralism that has invaded Christianity (he writes with punch but needs more nuance).

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## **Jeffrey says**

Ellul's radical thesis in this book: Christianity has been perverted from its original essence. The formalistic organizations of the Church; the affirmation of the various social status quo within the Protestant Ethics; the substitution of revelation for easy to understand images (e.g. Father, Son, Baby...), and more--all these pervert the purpose, and indeed, the true meaning of Christianity.

Ellul brought a powerful mind to a challengingly acerbic theological thesis. In more than a few parts, Ellul nearly fell into Gnosticism given how important his rhetoric of secret knowledge and revelation plays in his thesis. Ellul is likely to demur from mysticism--he himself rejected this position in the book--yet one is unable to read this book at least on first reading without thinking that Ellul himself was also a mystic; at least a mystic that often found himself arguing against the poverty and reductionism of the organized rationalistic world. Here, one is likely to find the spiritual hypothesis of Ellul's earlier thesis in 'La Technique'.

Where this book really shines is Ellul's preservation of a Christian conscience in a thesis that ineluctably argues against what is perceivably, and acceptably, Christianity. Too often we find theologians either arguing for Christ against the Church, or for Christ against Paul. Surprisingly, Ellul was able to thread this fine (and very meaningful line) well, since it is within this often conflictive tripartite relationship between Christ, the



Church and the Pauline doctrines where he expounded his thesis. In an age where even apologetics have chosen the path of going against or deviating from the Word, Ellul did amazingly well—he chose the Word yet remained undogmatic, thereby demonstrating that a conscientious Christian thinker can also be a philosophical one.

While I deemed Ellul successful on first read to have argued his case convincingly, he was less successful, I think, when he ventured into bits of speculative metaphysics (though it was all quite persuasive) to expound on the connection between the 'dominions and powers' of this age with his own thesis. Between the intellectual choice of a pure spiritualistic approach and the allegorical choice of representing these spiritual entities with simple to understand manifestations, Ellul could not really make up his mind. I suppose a deeper commitment to either choice would also have been a wiser and certainly clearer choice. Furthermore, Ellul made multiple propositions within his text—too many to count really—that at least on the pains of immediacy and superficiality, seem to contradict many Scriptural implications.

Part political thesis, part theological argument, and part Gnostic revelation, Ellul's book aspires to great affront for every Christian (and well so) but also inspires great promise for the reader who complements Scriptural readings with hermeneutical expositions.

At its core, even though Ellul reiterated that Christianity, and more so, Christ, can never be compressed and reduced into an idea, an image or a philosophy, he had nonetheless elected to use philosophy in order to represent these ideas. And so what I deem this book to be: a most intriguing set of arguments, and consistent to the pluralism in Christianity today, that these practices of Christianity have almost nothing to do, and as a matter of fact, overwhelmingly contradict the message and purpose of Christ.

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### **Michael Camp says**

A must read for every Christian. Jacques Ellul cuts to the chase in exposing the many misguided practices and beliefs of the church throughout history. The true message of the gospel has been perverted and Ellul will help you see the original meaning with new eyes.

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### **Leandro Guimarães says**

Une des mes meilleures lectures récentes, avec John H Walton & Jean-Marc Berthoud — même que ce soient trois auteurs bien différents, quasiment opposés, surtout Berthoud & Ellul.

Un défi pour chrétiens & incroyants, & surtout pour l'église.

Je voulais pouvoir enlever demi étoile car il élogie un mouvement de libération amérindien tout en critiquant la théologie de la libération — même que ce mouvement n'aie jamais existé hors de sa théologie. Je retiens la critique, & je lamente l'éloge.

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### **Sara says**

Sometimes a bit hard to read because he rather likes tangents and doesn't follow all the "correct" writing

forms. Some things I didn't fully agree with and/or was confused by, but in general I really appreciated all that he had to say. I will need to do some digesting and mulling for a while. I stimulated on of the best discussions we've had at book club!

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## **James says**

Like Barth and Brunner before him, Jacques Ellul makes a distinction between the true faith and a institutionalized, world-encrusted religion. In "The Subversion of Christianity," Ellul condemns the Christian religion as a faith subverted by the world. He decries the triumph of philosophy. Theologians readily begin with the biblical witness or revelation but then quickly leave it behind. In a desire to reach the truth, they develop moral codes, philosophical systems, and metaphysical constructs. Although they have good intentions, their result destroys the love and grace of the gospel.

Jacques Ellul is very careful about the charges that he makes against Christianity. His arguments are subtle, and Ellul is quick to acknowledge the hyperbole of those who criticize the faith from the outside. Nonetheless, he often finds a kernel of truth at the root of those criticisms. Ellul blames the worst of Christianity on it's subversion. Moreover, the author levels charges against the church that even her greatest critics do not. For example, he suggests that Christianity itself is at least partly responsible for the rise of nihilism. Biblical revelation destroys the legitimacy of every other worldview. A weakened and subverted Christianity then provides a poor substitute, basically leaving us to ourselves.

At the end, Ellul still offers hope. The institutionalization of the faith appears almost inevitable, but the resurgence of the gospel is likewise inevitable. As Jesus said, the "gates of hell will not prevail against [the church]" (Matthew 16:18). That does not mean there is one particular solution. In reality there are times and places of renewal and retreat. Many times revival comes not as the church relates to itself. Instead, revival comes as the church relates to the world.

"The Subversion of Christianity" is a profound work that deserves more than a cursory read.

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## **Emi says**

In summary, it's the Grand Inquisitor (Dostoevsky), expanded and retold by a French sociologist Jacques Ellul who concludes in the spirit of Alyosha.

I had never read anything by Ellul but was drawn to him through some references made by Walter Brueggemann (and I think also by Neil Postman). Influences of Kierkegaard and Barth are evident.

There were occasions where I felt some strain in his exegesis but he offers an enlightening perspective on church history not to condemn but to awaken -- although his words do pierce where most would take offense like those of a prophet. Neither Catholics nor Protestants, liberals nor conservatives, theologians nor mystics will be left acquitted.

His tone is passionate, as the subject matter deserves, and resonates well with my spirit also. Recommended for those of Christian faith with ears to hear quietly without self-defense, interjections, or apology -- that you

might be inspired rather than discouraged.

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