

## **Jacques Ellul and *The Subversion of Christianity***

Charles St-Onge, February 22, 2003

### **Introduction**

Jacques Ellul, born near the ancient province of Saintonge in France, was the foremost French Protestant writer of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, he could be considered the best French proponent of Karl Barth and his Neo-Orthodox theology. Although a lawyer by training, Ellul was also a prolific author in the areas of history, sociology, ethics, and theology. He is probably most well known in academic circles for his critique of western civilization's unquestioned faith in technology and system thinking, which he dubbed "technique."<sup>A</sup> His theological works are numerous, spanning the theological basis for western jurisprudence to monographs on biblical books like Ecclesiastes and Revelation.

Ellul, while remaining critical of some traditional Reformed positions, and even tending toward Luther on the question of predestination and Christology, remains faithful to his tradition in most areas. He remains committed to the key principle of "justification by grace through faith alone," although like Bonhoeffer he stresses the importance of a faith active in works.<sup>1</sup> He holds to a strict monergistic view of conversion, seeing the Holy Spirit as the sole active agent in the creation of faith.<sup>2</sup> He sees the Bible as the trustworthy revelation of God to humanity, without contradiction. With his typical sarcasm, he writes, "(Revelation) cannot be summarized, as has been done before, as a dichotomy between the pure message of Jesus and on the other hand the frightening God of the Jews or the detestable Paul, that lying interpreter."<sup>B 3</sup> The Scriptures reveal that God cannot be understood apart from his revelation in Christ Jesus. Christ is not a part of God, or merely a reflection of God, but totally and completely God. "In the end, he is the God who is incarnate completely in one man... God is there. It's not a little bit of God that is found in Jesus."<sup>4</sup> He even believes the key to understanding Scripture is a dialectical hermeneutic, and that any attempt to resolve the opposites of Scripture (ex: God the completely other became incarnate in a man) results in a false faith.<sup>5</sup> All of these views show a man committed to that 20<sup>th</sup> century reincarnation of Reformed (and, to a certain extent, Lutheran) theology known as Neo-Orthodoxy.

What concerns Ellul the most about modern Christianity is that, in his opinion, it bears little to no resemblance to the Christianity of the Scriptures and of the early Church. How is it, Ellul wonders, that "the development of Christian society and of the Church has given birth to a society, a civilization, a culture the complete opposite of what we read in the Bible?"<sup>6</sup> Ellul believes that several outside factors "twisted" Christian thinking as it developed through the ages, with the end result that the faith departed substantially from the intentions of its Savior and God, Jesus Christ. Among these factors are the "sacralization" of Christianity, its moralization, its encounter with Islam, its acceptance of temporal power, and its fusion with philosophical thinking. In every case Christianity exchanged its heritage for the aberrant views of the outside influence. In Ellul's words, "what always becomes dominant is the lapse, the addition, etc., which is to say the rotten part."<sup>7</sup>

### **The Sacralization of Christianity**

Ellul presents God as being completely "other," transcendent over his creation, yet completely present and knowable to that creation in the person of Jesus Christ: a typically Barthian view. In contrast to this view is that of the pagan religions, which see the world as a continuum of the mundane and the "sacred," a word that might also be translated as "holy" or "magical." In the beginning, Christianity provided a stark contrast to the pagan religions of its milieu by being an "unsacred" religion. Consider, for example,

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<sup>A</sup> Of note are his first work on the subject, *Technique or the Game of the Century*, (*La Technique ou l'Enjeu de la siecle*, Paris: Armand Colin, 1954) as well as *The Technical System* (*La Système technicien*, Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1977).

<sup>B</sup> All quotes are translations from the French by the author.

the constant application of the moniker “atheist” to the Christians of the early church by the outside world. For early Christianity, only man deserved the title “sacred.” In other words, in all of creation only man could be present to God through his speaking, and receive God through his Word.<sup>c</sup> Ellul writes, “The Bible places the Word as the only connection with God. God speaks. Man speaks. There is nothing else.”<sup>8</sup> In early Christianity there were no “temples,” magical rites, sacrifices, or priests. “Now it is the assembly of the faithful who have become a ‘body of priests.’ Everyone is one, therefore no one.”<sup>9</sup>

As Christianity turned pagan gods into saints and converted pagan temples into churches, it began to be influenced by pagan concepts of the “sacred.” Suddenly the introduction of a priesthood, of a Eucharistic sacrifice, of *ex opere operato* rites, of temples. Christianity became sacralized once again. In Ellul’s words, “It is no longer the relationship of faith of the believer to God that counts but the ritual of the Church and the object which possesses the sacred power of transformation.”<sup>10</sup> Only a church that remains faithful to God’s Word alone, and sees God and man alone as the sacred in the world will be truly Christian.

### **The Moralization of Christianity**

In the beginning, Christianity was the pure preaching of the grace and love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Far from being a new moral teaching, the New Testament (and the Old Testament as well, although perhaps not quite so obviously) was an “antimoral.” The Christian does not receive a set of rules, or even a set of guidelines from God. Rather, the believer has an encounter with his own sinfulness and God’s graciousness in Christ. In Ellul’s words, “there is an acknowledgment of the revealed God, faith in his love, acceptance of his will and from there a search for a way of life that responds to the love of God and his will.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed the idea of a Christian morality is impossible for Ellul. The Christian is always a sinner, justified by God, and so a new moral will be do nothing at all to help him out of his fallen state.

Then Christianity became a state religion in the early 300s AD. Suddenly ‘mass evangelization’ became more important than careful catechesis in the faith. The genuineness of conversion could no longer be ascertained. The end result was a church that had to develop a morality, a standard of conduct for the masses of people who had just flooded its sanctuaries. Morality replaced the freedom of the converted man to love God and his fellow man. Laws imposed by the church from the outside replaced the Spirit leading the believer into the revealed will of God. Sadly, the fallen state of man found this state of affairs quite pleasing. Ellul notes that even when the freedom of the Christian in the Gospel was rediscovered at the time of the Reformation, it was not long before the church returned to its old moralizing ways:

(Morality was) the breaking point, everyone knows, of the Lutheran reformation. But the slope is so steep that as soon as the first generation, which rediscovered Christian liberty, passed, (the church) returned, particularly with Calvin, to rigid morality and the predominance of the ‘moral’ in the ‘life of Christ.’<sup>12</sup>

### **Christianity’s Contact with Islam**

Another factor which influenced the church for the worst was its encounter with a newly expanding Arabic religion: Islam. Ellul traces the development of the concepts of the “just war” and the “right of kings”, as well as the idea of slavery and colonization to the influence of Islam on Christianity. He notes,

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<sup>c</sup> It is worth noting that the translation of *logos* into French has long been a matter of debate. Some translations of the Scriptures use “verbe”, or verb. Others use “parole,” which might be translated into English as “speech,” but which also carries the connotation of “promise.” In both cases, however, *logos* is given the sense of event or action which the static English “word” does not carry quite as well.

for example, that “War is an integral part of Islam. It’s written in her doctrine, on one hand a fact of her civilization, on the other hand a religious fact, but it cannot be separated.”<sup>13</sup> Christianity, until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, expanded through its goodness, its example, and its help to the poor. Islam, in contrast, spread through warfare. Already weakened, as will be noted in the next section, by its adoption of worldly power under Constantine, Christianity also accepted the idea of fighting in the name of the Lord. The foundations for such horrific events as the forced conversions of the Jews by the Spanish Inquisition were laid not in Christ’s teaching, but in the Church’s adoption of Islamic views of religion.

### **Christianity’s Acceptance of Worldly Power**

Ellul also sees Christianity as being corrupted by its acceptance of temporal power and authority:

All the comparisons that (Jesus) makes tend to show that the disciples of Jesus are necessarily few in number with little power. The leaven in the dough. The salt in the soup. The sheep in the middle of wolves, and how many other images. Jesus seems to have never had the vision of a triumphant and triumphing Church encircling the globe. He always presents a secret power which changes things on the inside, which works spiritually...<sup>14</sup>

Where Christ taught a spiritual kingdom, present in weakness, the Church became a worldly kingdom under the medieval popes. Even now, though it possesses less direct worldly power than it once did, the Church still continues to seek to provide divine authority for whatever earthly rule it finds itself under. Over time the Church has given her spiritual imprimatur to republicanism, monarchism, fascism, democracy, and even communism. In Ellul’s words, “From the moment that the Church accepts being associated with the State, she is really obliged to associate with whatever form the State takes.” (Ellul, 194) Furthermore, to make the point, Ellul points out,

When Satan presents (Jesus) with all the kingdoms of the earth by telling him that he’ll give them all to him, Jesus refuses. But the Church will accept. No longer knowing from whom she receives them!<sup>15</sup>

### **Christianity’s Use of Philosophy**

Lastly, the intrusion of philosophizing into Christianity has taken a tremendous toll on the Church. Ellul points out, first of all, that the Bible is nothing but “a history that tells us, ‘who is God with and for man,’ but which never speaks of God in himself, which never furnishes a theory about God.”<sup>16</sup> Once the question of who God is in and of himself is asked, Christianity no longer remains faithful to her Lord. “(The systematizing theologians) used the biblical text according to their needs instead of listening to it as they found it (even Calvin, alas!).”<sup>17</sup> This is not to say that Ellul rejects all theology and theologians. He believes they play a necessary role in many areas. But he does feel that systematic theology is always on the edge of saying too much. Of that she must always be on guard.

### **Conclusion**

Ellul makes some very good points, while perhaps overstepping his bounds in others. His critique of the sacralization of Christianity might serve well as a counterbalance to excessive “sacralizing” occurring in our own church body. If “justification by grace through faith alone” is replaced by a belief that “the finite *is* capable of the infinite” as the statement on which the church stands or falls, Christianity will be in danger of returning to a magical view of its rituals and rites to the denigration of the living of the Christian faith in the world. Ellul is also not afraid to point out the radical discontinuities between Islam and Christianity. This is a message of which all Christians need to be reminded. Ellul’s critique of the post-Constantinian church’s “desire to do ‘mass evangelization’ while not worrying much about the

authenticity of the faith of the converts”<sup>18</sup> is just as relevant today, especially when one considers the “everything goes” mentality of some American Christians when it comes to “mass evangelization.”

On the negative side, Ellul is clearly Reformed in his denigration of the sacraments to mere signs of spiritual realities. One does not want to extol the Word of God at the expense of sacramental realities, just as one does not want to return to a high sacramentality bordering on the magical. Ellul also makes two statements that are quite troublesome. In a footnote, he writes, “God comes to man wearing many ‘masks.’”<sup>19</sup> He goes on to talk about God wearing the masks of Father, Son and Holy Spirit when dealing with humanity – certainly modalist language. Near the end of the book, he writes, “In Christ all men are saved, and nothing can stop this being so.”<sup>20</sup> This certainly seems to be a statement of universal salvation. Both of these statements are troubling in what otherwise seems to be very sound Christian, perhaps even Lutheran, theology. They reveal his clear bent towards Neo-Orthodox, rather than purely Reformed, theology.

Ellul is nonetheless to be commended for putting his finger on many of the factors which have negatively influenced Christianity, and how to ensure that Christians remain faithful to the biblical revelation of God and his incarnation and salvation in Christ Jesus. His clear confession of the historical truth of Christ’s virgin incarnation and resurrection set him part from many in the Neo-Orthodox camp. One certainly wonders who will take up his banner in engaging the francophone world in the years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Ellul, *La subversion de la christianisme*, (Paris: La table ronde, 2001 c. 1984). 13.

<sup>2</sup> Ellul, 161.

<sup>3</sup> Ellul, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Ellul, 72.

<sup>5</sup> Ellul, 72-73.

<sup>6</sup> Ellul, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ellul, 35.

<sup>8</sup> Ellul, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Ellul, 95.

<sup>10</sup> Ellul, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Ellul, 67.

<sup>12</sup> Ellul, 114.

<sup>13</sup> Ellul, 156.

<sup>14</sup> Ellul, 58.

<sup>15</sup> Ellul, 192.

<sup>16</sup> Ellul, 41.

<sup>17</sup> Ellul, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Ellul, 51.

<sup>19</sup> Ellul, 22.

<sup>20</sup> Ellul, 272.

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