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Jacques Ellul: The Original "Liberation Theologian"

by Thomas Hanks

This article was originally prepared for the Boletín Teológico of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, and has been translated for the TSF Bulletin by Stan Slade. In part two, appearing in September–October 1984, Hanks continues his analysis with "How Ellul Transcends Liberation Theologians."

It is difficult for the scholars of the North to pigeonhole Jacques Ellul. Indeed, some of their efforts to do so have been simply ridiculous. Paul Pickrel, in *Harper's*, concluded that Ellul is a "Catholic layman"¹ (as a French Christian, must Ellul be Catholic?). Professor W. Waldo Beach of Duke Divinity School writes in the Foreword of *To Will and To Do* that Ellul is a "conservative evangelical" or a "Biblical conservative."² This article will explore the hypothesis that Ellul is a "theologian of liberation," although born both "before his time" and geographically out of place. If he had written his first theological work in Latin America in 1968 (instead of in France in 1946) no one would have had trouble categorizing him, even though it would have to be recognized that he is a singular and quite complex exemplar. What follows is a brief summary of the evidence for this hypothesis.

1. Ellul as Precursor of the Theologies of Liberation

1.1 Option for the Poor

During the thirties European theologies and middle class churches had very little to do with the poor. As a law student, Ellul began to read Marx, and then became a Marxist. From Marx he learned, even before his Christian conversion, the fundamental necessity of a commitment to the poor.³ Furthermore, in the case of Ellul, this commitment sprang from the circumstances of his own family during his youth and early childhood. Ellul indicates that the fact of having grown up in a "rather poor" family is "one of the most decisive elements" of his life: "I experienced true poverty in every way, and I know very well the life of a family in a wretched milieu."⁴ "All of my childhood I lived the life you read of in novels about working-class families in the depression."⁵ His father was unemployed for long stretches of time, and "when one of the three of us got sick, it was a disaster."⁶ He played on the docks of Bordeaux. Later, during the Nazi occupation, he got to know country life. Due to his open opposition to the Nazis, he lost his place in the University. This led him to move to the countryside, where he collaborated with the resistance and raised potatoes to support his family.

After the war, already in his first general theological work (*The Presence of the Kingdom*, 1948), Ellul began to advance a "revolutionary Christianity."⁷ In 1950 he developed the implications for the poor of this view in *Money and Power*,⁸ in which he devoted an entire chapter to the biblical concept of the poor, based on a study of Hebrew terms. He concluded with this affirmation: "The Bible thus establishes the poor in the very center of its truth and life, confronting every man . . . since the Bible speaks to us of the poor, we cannot take the side of the powerful in this world."⁹ In his later works, Ellul has repeatedly returned to the challenge posed by the poor, elaborating his vision and applying it concretely to new situations.¹⁰ Ellul's most recent book, *Changer de révolution* (1982),¹¹ is entirely devoted to the problem of the proletariat, especially in the Third World and communist countries.

1.2 Dialogue with Marx

As a law student of nineteen, in the midst of the Great Depression (1930), Ellul began to study Marx, and very soon became a Marxist:

I plunged into Marx, and all at once felt as if I had discovered something totally unexpected and totally stupefying, precisely because it related directly to my practical experience. . . . I read *Das Kapital*. I felt I understood everything. I felt that at last I knew why my father was out of work, at last I knew why we were destitute!¹²

Even after his Christian conversion (1934) Ellul continued in this conviction:

What Marx had brought to me was a certain way of "seeing" the political, economic, and social problems—a method of interpretation, a sociology. So it did not seem impossible to utilize this, starting with the Christian faith. I could not accept the view that there should be a Christian faith without social and political consequences. On the other hand, however, I saw clearly that one could not deduce directly from Biblical texts political or social consequences valid for our epoch. It seemed to me that the method of Karl Marx (but not of the Communists!) was superior to all that I had encountered elsewhere.¹³

However, Ellul never got to the point of unifying in a single philosophical system his Christian faith and the scientific contribution of Marx. After the war, he introduced the first course on Marx in a French university and continued to teach it for thirty years. Even in 1981 he confessed:

I . . . remained unable to eliminate Marx, unable to eliminate the biblical revelation, and unable to merge the two. For me, it was impossible to put them together. So I began to be torn between the two, and I have remained so all my life. The development of my thinking can be explained starting with this contradiction!¹⁴

A number of conservative Christians have been content to cite, out of context, Ellul's strong criticisms of the communists of our era. But we must never forget Ellul's profound recognition of and appreciation for Marx as a social scientist. Nor may we forget that all of Ellul's sociological and theological work has been accomplished in the context of an intense dialogue with Marx, and a rereading of him that has lasted over fifty years. Very few theologians of liberation are so thoroughly acquainted with Marx, the various marxisms, and especially the sad history of European communist parties and regimes in the way that Ellul is.

1.3 The Social Sciences in the Task of Theology

Actually, the "marxism" of Ellul is but a part of the much larger contribution to his thought made by the social sciences. He is best known not as a theologian but as the sociologist who authored a

¹ Paul Pickrel, *Harper's*, cited on the back cover Ellul, *The Technological Society*, Vintage Books/Random House, 1964 [hereafter, *TS*].

² Waldo Beach, p. vii in Ellul, *To Will and To Do*, Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1969 [hereafter, *TWTD*].

³ Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, ed., William H. Vanderburg, Canadian Broadcasting Company, 1981, p. 11 [hereafter, *POA*].

⁴ Ellul, *POA*, p. 1.

⁵ Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, Harper & Row, 1982, p. 7 [hereafter, *ISOS*].

⁶ Ellul, *ISOS*, p. 8.

⁷ Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, Seabury, New York, 1967 (French edition, 1948), pp. 60–70 [hereafter, *PK*].

⁸ Ellul, *L'homme et l'argent*, Presses Bibliques Universitaires, 2e 1979 (cp. 1e 1954), pp. 186–200; *idem*, *Money and Power*, InterVarsity, Downers Grove, 1984 [hereafter, *HA*].

⁹ Ellul, *HA*, p. 200.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, Seabury, New York, 1978, pp. 85–125; *idem*, *The Ethics of Freedom*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, pp. 45, 50, 205, 320–22 (exposition of Matt. 23:31–46), 414, 417, 424, 497; [hereafter, *EF*].

¹¹ Ellul, *Changer de révolution. L'inductible prolétariat*, Seuil, Paris, 1982 [hereafter, *CR*].

¹² Ellul, *POA*, pp. 4–5.

¹³ Ellul, "From Jacques Ellul," in James Holloway, ed., *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, p. 5 [hereafter, *Holloway JJE*].

¹⁴ Ellul, *ISOS*, p. 16.

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best-seller in the sixties, *The Technological Society*. This work, recognized by various social scientists as one of the decisive books of our time, gives us not only an analysis of modern society, but a whole new *Weltanschauung*, comparable to that of Marx's *Das Kapital*. Ellul explains the relation in this way:

Marx showed me the dialectical nature of social phenomena, and also oriented me strongly toward a study of technique. I was actually a Marxist in 1933–1934, and I asked myself then: If Marx were alive today, would he be so disposed to cite as the crucial social phenomenon of history the ownership of property? What would he cite as crucial? And I decided it would be the phenomenon of technique. Of course, this is something that many followers of Marx today would not propose.¹⁵

Although *The Technological Society* is what catapulted Ellul to fame in the English-speaking world, in French his *magnum opus* is his *Histoire des institutions* (1951–56).¹⁶ This multi-volume work, comprising some 1500 pages, serves as the text for Ellul's basic course in the Faculty of Law and the Institute for Political Studies in Bordeaux. Also, over and above his many articles, Ellul's books *Propaganda* (1962)¹⁷ and *The Political Illusion* (1965)¹⁸ represent fundamental contributions in their respective fields (communications and political science). The social analysis has influenced not only various Christian theologians, but also thinkers as diverse as Herbert Marcuse, E. F. Schumacher and John Kenneth Galbraith.

Ellul was over twenty years ahead of liberation theologies in demonstrating the decisive role of the social sciences for Christian praxis and theology.

It is impossible to understand Ellul's biblical and theological works without seeing them in the context of his contribution to the social sciences. This is especially true of his ethics, of which three volumes are planned, with the first volume (*The Ethics of Freedom*) and half of the prolegomena (*To Will and To Do*)¹⁹ already published. While the influence of Barth is decisive for Ellul's ethics²⁰, Ellul criticizes Barth's ethics for its lack of social realism. In fact, beginning with *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948), this is a criticism that Ellul has frequently lodged against the church and its postwar theologians:

I hardly ever find Protestants speaking with competence on political economics, sociology, social psychology, or political science.²¹

Much has been written about the achievement of theologians of liberation in "baptizing" Marx and the social sciences for theological use. However—and here the evidence is overwhelming—the "John the Baptist" in this has been Jacques Ellul. The efforts of our theologians in this area have been admirable, and their contributions to theology have been of transcendent importance, but none of them even approach Ellul in terms of multiple and fundamental contributions to the social sciences themselves. Ellul was over twenty years ahead of the theologies of liberation in calling for and demonstrating the decisive role of the social sciences for Christian praxis and doing theology.

1.4 Dialectic Thinking

José Porfirio Miranda reproaches Marx for being "insufficiently dialectical" because the latter failed to recognize the resurrection of Christ as the antithesis of death.²² It is doubtful that anyone could raise the same criticism against Ellul, who says:

I am a dialectician above all: I believe nothing can be understood without dialectical analysis.²³

One might with more reason complain that Ellul is "too dialectical," since he applies this mode of thought even when it does not correspond to reality.²⁴ But such criticism does not disturb Ellul. In

1981 various U.S. professors published a book of essays on Ellul's thought—some rather negative in their analyses. Instead of responding to their accusations individually, Ellul wrote an essay, "On Dialectic," in which he indicated that North Americans have much trouble understanding his thought because so few of them know how to analyze and think dialectically.²⁵

Ellul sees the influence of Hegel, Marx, Kierkegaard and Barth in his dialectical way of analyzing reality. But he insists that this mode of thinking has its origins in the Old Testament, two centuries before the Greek philosophers Heraclitus and Zeno.²⁶

Thus, starting from his double conversion (to Marx and to Christ), and based in his study of Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Barth and the Bible, Ellul began to develop a sociology and a "theology of confrontation"—profoundly dialectical—over twenty years before the appearance of the theologies of liberation. John Boli-Bennett, an expert in the field of dialectics, concludes that Ellul's mixture of dialectical elements from the Marxist tradition and Neo-orthodox theology (Barth and Kierkegaard), his criticism of both traditions, and his development of the dialectic between social and spiritual reality have made a very important contribution to contemporary thought.²⁷

1.5 Salvation is Liberation (With Exodus as the Paradigm)

The growing preoccupation with the nature of Christian salvation was reflected in the theme of the ecumenical conference held in Bangkok (1971): "Salvation Today." Mortimer Arias gave classic expression to the new Latin American perspective in his book, *Salvacion es Liberacion* (1973).²⁸ A simple study, this work is nonetheless rich in the new insights of biblical theology in our context, with special emphases on the Exodus and the Exile. In 1978 Pope John Paul II endorsed the new Latin American theologies at Puebla with his affirmation that Christian salvation must be understood as "integral liberation."²⁹

However, as Geoffrey Bromley has pointed out, this new understanding of the dimensions of biblical salvation—so decisive for the proclamation of the gospel in the Third World—has clear antecedents in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and has also received a strong concrete impulse from the writings of Ellul (culminating in his *The Ethics of Freedom* [1973]):

This freedom (unleashed at the cross) is received exclusively in Christ, making the gospel essentially one of liberation. Here again is a theme that recurs constantly in Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, and Ellul takes it up with vigor. Liberation, he thinks, provides the present age with a better figure of salvation than redemption does. He does not suggest, of course, that preaching the Gospel can be equated with achieving political and economic liberation by a change in government. The problem goes deeper than that. Under any government, man lies in subjection to forces that enslave him. In this tragic situation, philosophers prattle about freedom, theologians utter empty platitudes, and revolutionaries suffer from the delusion that they are achieving liberation even as they serve historical determinations; but only Christ, who displayed his own freedom in the temptations, can bring true emancipation.³⁰

¹⁵ David C. Menninger, "Jacques Ellul: A Tempered Profile," *Review of Politics* 37: 239, April 1975; cited by David Gill, "Jacques Ellul: The Prophet as Theologian," *Themelios* VII:1:57, Sept. 1981.

¹⁶ Ellul, *Histoire des institutions*, Vols. I–V, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1951–56.

¹⁷ Ellul, *Propaganda*, Vintage/Knopf, New York, 1963.

¹⁸ Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, Knopf, New York, 1967. Cp. David C. Menninger, "Technique and Politics: The Political Thought of Jacques Ellul," doctoral dissertation, UC Riverside, 1974 [hereafter, "Politics"]; Ellul, *To Will and To Do*, Pilgrim Press, Philadelphia, 1969.

¹⁹ Geoffrey Bromley, "Barth's Influence on Jacques Ellul," pp. 32–51 in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, eds., *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, U. of Illinois Press, Urbana [hereafter, *Christians and Van Hook, Essays*].

²⁰ Ellul, *PK*, p. 55; *False Presence of the Kingdom*, Seabury, New York, pp. 153–69 [hereafter, *FP*]; cp. *Violence*, SCM, London, 1970, pp. 30–35.

²¹ Miranda, *Marx and the Bible*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, p. 279.

²² Menninger, "Jacques Ellul: A Tempered Profile," in *Review of Politics*, 37:240, April, 1975. Ellul himself has made a similar criticism of Marx; see John Boli-Bennett, p. 193, cited in Note 27.

²³ David Walter Gill, "The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul," doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California, 1979, pp. 221–227.

²⁴ Ellul, "Epilogue: On Dialectic," in *Christians and Van Hook, Essays*, p. 297.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 298; cp. in the same volume, Vernard Eller, "Ellul and Kierkegaard: Closer than Brothers," pp. 54–56; Holloway, *JE*, pp. 6, 20.

²⁶ John Boli-Bennett, "The Absolute Dialectics of Jacques Ellul," *Research in Philosophy & Technology*, Vol. 3, 1980, pp. 171–201 [hereafter, "Dialectics"].

²⁷ Mortimer Arias, *Salvacion es Liberacion*, La Aurora, Buenos Aires, 1973.

²⁸ John Eagleson & Philip Scharper, *Puebla and Beyond*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, p. 74 et passim, 1979.

²⁹ Bromley, *op. cit.*, pp. 42–43. Cp. George Hunsinger, ed., *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1976.

Obviously, according to Ellul the freedom that Christ brings us goes far beyond the slogans of the left. It addresses not only the economic-political-military oppression suffered by the Third World, but also the great problems common to all capitalist, socialist and communist countries: the domination of technology and propaganda, totalitarian states, militarism, ecological disaster, the alienation of persons in large cities, etc.

However, Ellul shares the liberation theologians' emphasis on the Exodus as the decisive paradigm:

The Jews themselves saw that the first liberation from Egypt is the guarantee and promise of all the others. It is because God frees them there that he is the liberator, and henceforth there can be no other . . . [The deliverance from Egypt] is not just political. It is also liberation from the kingdom of evil. It is a liberation which symbolizes all liberation. Finally, for Israel, too, this first liberation guarantees the final and definitive liberation which will complete world history and which the people await.

When, therefore, Paul says that Jesus Christ is the liberator, and when he sets up his doctrine of liberty . . . he is taking up the whole thought of Scripture. One could almost say that he is aligning himself with the whole of the Old Testament.³¹

Without doubt, *The Ethics of Freedom* is where all of Ellul's passion and profundity on this theme reach their climax. But whoever reads his earlier works can recognize that the authentic freedom that springs from the cross of Christ represents the great *leitmotif* and goal of the whole. His sociological works (on technology, propaganda, politics, revolution, etc.) expose the problem. His works of theology and biblical exposition proclaim the gospel of Christ the Liberator, and call us—from *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948) to *The Ethics of Freedom* (1973)—to a "revolutionary Christianity" and a praxis of authentic liberation.

1.6 A Kingdom Hermeneutic

José Míguez Bonino has pointed out how the dynamic biblical concept of the Kingdom of God was corrupted early in the history of the church, with noxious effects, enduring even in Catholic tradition (despite its canonical preference for the synoptic gospels):

There is no doubt that the ardent expectation of the total transformation of the world and the advent of the Kingdom of God was soon replaced in Christianity by a spiritualized and individualistic hope for immortal, celestial life.³²

Beyond our Catholic-Platonic heritage (almost all the traditional Catholic heresies can be explained as a syncretizing of the Bible and Greek philosophy/religion), three dominant influences have made Latin American Protestants even more heretical than the Catholic tradition in our abuse and abandoning of the "gospel of the Kingdom."³³

1. *The Reformation*, in response to its polemical context (the idea of salvation by works), seized upon two of Paul's epistles (Romans and Galatians) in order to center the gospel in the doctrine of justification by faith (*sola fe, sola gratia*) instead of the Kingdom of God (so central for the synoptics), or the abundant life, beginning now (John).³⁴ Hans Küng, while recognizing the validity of the arguments of Luther, Calvin, and Barth, has underlined well the notable lack of the term "justification"—even in Paul himself (see Ephesians!)—in the rest of the New Testament writings.³⁵ In the case of Luther, the Platonic-Catholic dichotomy (earthly vs. spiritual) received a new impulse in his theology of the "two kingdoms."
2. *Pietism*, in reaction against the state churches of the seventeenth century, in effect promoted a Christianity that attempted to be "apolitical."
3. *Dispensationalism*, through the Scofield Bible and the systematic theology of Lewis Sperry Chafer, with its notion of a "postponed" Kingdom—and the church as an unexpected "parenthesis"—effectively robbed the people of God of the synoptic gospels with their gospel of the Kingdom, the revolutionary praxis of the Sermon on the Mount, and the "subversive" prayer that Jesus taught his disciples.³⁶

Faced with a platonized Catholicism, the theologies of liberation

have developed, in a form uniquely suited to the socio-economic context of the Third World, the implications of the biblical teaching about the Kingdom of God.³⁷ At the same time, faced with the multiple deviation of Latin American Protestantism produced by neoplatonic syncretism, the canonical prejudice of the Reformers, "apolitical" pietism, and dispensationalist fantasies, various "radical evangelical" theologians (who wish to contextualize theology without simply identifying themselves with the theologies of liberation) have likewise discovered in the Kingdom of God a hermeneutical key for biblical interpretation and evangelistic-missiological praxis. Theologians such as René Padilla, Samuel Escobar, and above all (in this regard) Orlando Costas, have made a courageous and persistent effort to return evangelicals to the gospel of the Kingdom.³⁸

North Americans have much trouble understanding his thought because so few of them know how to analyze and think dialectically.

However (in addition to many other precursors), this entire process in Latin America of returning to the gospel of the Kingdom by radical evangelicals and theologians of liberation has obvious antecedents in the writings of Jacques Ellul.

Ellul recognizes as decisive for his theological formation the influence of two Reformed theologians: John Calvin and—even more—Karl Barth. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that the other pole in the dialectic of his theology of liberation is the sovereignty of God, that is, "Yahweh is King" (Old Testament) and "Jesus is Lord" (New Testament). The first book to expound his theology in a global form was *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948). William Stringfellow has called it "Jacques Ellul's most astonishing work" and "an authentically prophetic work."³⁹ Nearly all the great themes and problems that later appear as important books in their own right can be found as kernels in this little (153 pages!) book: technology, propaganda, politics, the state, ethics, and liberation. The situation somewhat parallels the development of the first small edition of the *Institutes* of the young Calvin. Charles Troutman has observed that Ellul, like Calvin, had the prophetic perspicuity to see the essential comprehensively, even at a young age.

As Bromiley has indicated, Ellul follows Barth closely in his way of understanding the relation between human freedom and divine sovereignty: free human resolutions are enclosed in the free decision of God.⁴⁰

Specifically, Ellul chooses the book of Kings to illustrate the interaction between divine lordship and human freedom. But in all of Ellul's works of biblical exposition, "those who know even a little of Barth can detect his presence in the same hermeneutic methods."⁴¹

It is central and axiomatic within the Reformed hermeneutic of the Kingdom that Christ is "Lord of all" (Acts 10:36). Therefore his followers cannot accept a Marcionite dichotomy between the Old and New Testaments (perhaps the dominant heresy among Latin

³¹ Ellul, *EF*, p. 98.

³² José Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1974, pp. 133–34.

³³ John H. Yoder, "La Expectativa mesiánica del Reino y su carácter central para una adecuada hermenéutica contemporánea," in C. René Padilla, ed., *El Reino de Dios y América Latina*, Casa Bautista, El Paso, 1974.

³⁴ Elsa Tamez, *La Hora de la Vida*, DEI, San Jose, 1978, *passim*.

³⁵ Hans Küng, *Justification*, Thomas Nelson, New York, 1964, p. 8.

³⁶ Michael H. Crosby, *Thy Will be Done: Praying the Our Father as Subversive Activity*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1977.

³⁷ Míguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, pp. 150–52; Robert McAtee Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, Westminster, Philadelphia, 1978, pp. 75–100; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1973, *passim*.

³⁸ Padilla, *op. cit.*, see note 33; Orlando Costas, *Theology at the Crossroads in Contemporary Latin America*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1976, chs. 1 and 12; *idem*, *The Church and its Mission: A Shattering Critique from the Third World*, Tyndale, Wheaton, 1974, pp. 59–83; *idem*, *The Integrity of Mission*, Harper & Row, New York, 1979, pp. x, 5–8; *idem*, *Christ Outside the Gate*, Orbis, Maryknoll, 1982, pp. 11, 16, 27–29, 44–54, 88–98; *idem*, ed., *Hacia una teología de la evangelización*, Buenos Aires, 1973, pp. 14–15.

³⁹ William Stringfellow, "Introduction," Ellul, *PK*, p. 1; *cp.* Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1970, pp. 183–209.

⁴⁰ Bromiley, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

American Protestants) that in effect leaves governments and the spheres of politics, society, and economics outside the Lordship of Christ and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

Given the serious abuses of the concept of the presence of the Kingdom of God within European ecumenical circles—especially within his own denomination—Ellul found it necessary to return to this theme, elaborating the other side of the coin in his *False Presence of the Kingdom* (1964). It presents a call to authentic holiness and a necessary “separation” from the world. Ellul accuses the church of conforming too much to the world, of producing a tardy echo of the slogans of the left (sometimes 10–15 years later), even when claiming to be “prophetic”! This is the book that put an end to Ellul’s influence in ecumenical Protestant circles;⁴² in fact, in Bordeaux in 1982 we found that it was principally the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students movement (the evangelical community) and the Catholics who were listening to and providing a platform for Ellul (though neither group was entirely comfortable with what they heard!).

It is in any case evident that Ellul shares with the theologians of liberation and the radical evangelicals of Latin America a hermeneutical perspective and a theology of the Kingdom that challenge both the flight from the synoptics to Paul (Luther), and the Platonic-Marcionite dichotomies of the pietists and dispensationalists that are dominant in our context. His dialectical and polemical perspective avoids various common distortions: the neglect of the hermeneutical key of the Kingdom by the Reformation, pietism and dispensationalism, the Platonic distortion of the Kingdom within traditional Catholicism, and the naive humanistic optimism (“we build the Kingdom—with or without God”) of the old “social gospel,” marxism and certain extreme forms of theology of liberation.⁴³

1.7 Prophetic Praxis

We cannot provide here the details appropriate to a biographical article. But we must underline the fact that Ellul’s life is a rich source of inspiration for whoever wishes to witness authentic and profoundly Christian praxis: his opposition to the Nazis at the cost of his university position, his service as the vice-mayor of Bordeaux (1944–46), his ministry for twenty years to the members of Bordeaux’s street gangs, his struggle to transform the theological education of

his denomination, his work as a popular but controversial professor for 40 years—all of this reflects a fascinating and challenging life that would require an entire book to describe adequately.⁴⁴

Of course, we must recognize that the praxis of Ellul—as that of Marx himself—is seen primarily in his writings: some 40 books and over 650 articles! When reading the reviews—from very diverse sources—of these books, the adjective “prophetic” appears so frequently that it almost becomes a refrain.

As David Gill has indicated, even the literary genre and style of Ellul’s writings generally corresponds to the genre of prophecy:

Those coming to Ellul looking for systematic coherence, careful attention to all details, or sober academic refinement will be disappointed . . . Not only the content but the rhetorical style of his message is best appreciated as a challenging message for the times, a cry in the technological wilderness . . . One of the most difficult to accept aspects of Ellul’s work is his habitual overstatement, where he sounds as though life is all over, no political change or revolution is possible, etc.—or, conversely, where he proclaims the great victory of God or the radical transformation of human history by the Incarnation. Part of the reason for this hyperbole is his persistent and radical dialectical method. But another reason . . . is that he is writing in the heat of passion and concern. He engages in rhetorical exaggeration to try to provoke a degree of response that may ultimately redeem a situation. Like most prophets, Ellul’s offense is not only his message but his style as well!⁴⁵

⁴² Personal interview, Bordeaux, 1982.

⁴³ Ernesto Cardenal, *La santidad de la revolución*, Sigueme, Salamanca, 1978, pp. 20, 31, 57, 85. Cp. Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology*, p. 142: “The objections against expressions like ‘building’ the Kingdom are legitimate protests against naive optimism or at times justified protection of the primacy of divine initiative.”

⁴⁴ Ellul, *ISOS*, pp. 108–16, 117–38, 158–71. Ellul’s autobiography, to appear after his death, will consist of two volumes: David W. Gill, personal interviews, Bordeaux, June, 1982.

⁴⁵ David W. Gill, “Jacques Ellul: The Prophet as Theologian,” *Themelios* VII:1, Sept. 1982, pp. 14, 4–6. For the decisive role of praxis in his epistemology (like the “epistemological leap” in theologies of liberation) see Ellul’s critique of G. Casalis, *Les idées justes ne tombent pas du ciel* (Cert, Paris, 1977), in Ellul, *L’idéologie marxiste chrétienne* (Centurion, Paris, 1979), pp. 156–63; *TWID*, pp. 5–19. Katherine C. Temple, *The Task of Jacques Ellul*, Ph.D. dissertation, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1976, pp. 108–57; Christians and Van Hook, *Essays*, pp. 246–48; Ellul criticizes the marxist tradition for being as idealistic as Hegel; see John Boli-Bennett, “Dialectics,” p. 186.

Asking the Right Questions: Evangelism through Eucharist and Prayer

by Michele Matto

When I first came to the seminary, I expected to turn up the answers to a lot of questions I’ve had about what seems to be missing today in proclaimed Christianity—why so many people are turned off by the institutional church, why we can’t keep young people’s interest . . . basically, why membership is like a revolving door for so many who do join. No one has had the answers I sought, but people tell me I’ve learned to ask the right questions and now I’ve concluded that, paradoxically, asking the right questions *is* the answer.

I lead renewal music, much of it lately for a denomination whose members jokingly refer to themselves as “God’s frozen chosen.” The first thing I say to a group I stand before, in order to lower the stress level for those who have been told from childhood that they can’t sing, is that in renewal music the question is not, “Do you have a voice?” but rather, “Do you have a song?” Only from this base can we then get on with what singing is really all about.

I thought about that lead-in one night as I was listening in the car to one of those call-in radio programs where the question had been,

“Did you go to church yesterday? If so, why? If not, why not?” The real question, it became quickly apparent, was, “How do you feel about the institutional church?” What struck me as I listened to the responses was that those who responded from “inside” the church had voices, but those who were calling from “outside” seemed to have the Song. Knowledge of theology was about equally divided between the groups, but what captured my attention was that the “outsiders” were really asking the right questions.

The “outsiders” seemed to have a good grasp, at least intuitively, of the fact that Jesus came to bring us wholeness, and most of them had left the institutional church because they felt it was standing in the way of that wholeness rather than facilitating it. They seemed to have interpreted the church father’s statement that there is no salvation outside the church, as John Westerhoff does, to mean that there is no wholeness outside of community. In leaving the church they were actually *seeking* community, a community which gives them freedom to be who they are in-process and loves them wherever that is. They are seeking Jesus in the same way that Zacchaeus did and, sadly, have left the church to seek His love in whoever will just come to table with them “as is.”

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