

Jacques Ellul: Beyond Geneva and Jerusalem

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Go on, my dear Americans, whip your horses to the utmost—open up all your valves and let her go—swing, whirl with the rest—you will soon get under such momentum you can't stop if you would. Only make provision betimes, old States and new States, for several thousand insane asylums. You are in a fair way to create a whole nation of lunatics.

—Walt Whitman

Thus we seem caught between two necessities, which nothing can alter: on the one hand it is impossible for us to make this world less sinful; on the other hand it is impossible for us to accept it as it is. . . . This tension . . . of the Christian life . . . must be lived . . . in the most concrete way possible. . . . This is the only real way of helping the world, from the social, economic, and political point of view.

—Jacques Ellul

Part 1: Anti-Ellul

I find *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* repugnant: stained with atrabilious Calvinist clericalism, and a great falling-off from *The Presence of the Kingdom*. *The Presence of the Kingdom* (published in 1948) is written in the bright light (though then already fading) of Resistance and Liberation; *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (published in 1966) is written in the

trenches of the stalemated ideological warfare of the fifties and sixties. The falling-off is a slip in style and stance: in Barthian terminology, from prophecy to Church Dogmatics.

Ellul's reading in *The Politics of God* of 2Kings is not a historical analysis of the dialectical relationship between prophecy and kingship in the declining stages of the Davidian monarchy (as for example in Voegelin). He says:

We cannot view it as a stage in the theological elaboration of the concept of God by Israel. . . . Either Israel is the chosen people and receives a revelation from God, so that what it holds, transcribes, and transmits is a Word of God and not its own ideal, or Israel is not the chosen people and its ideas and myths and writings are of no more interest than those of the Aztecs or the Japanese. We have to make a decision here, a decision of faith. For my part I confess that Israel is the chosen people.

Ellul's unsubtle dilemma rescues the Old Testament from historical interpretation and restores it to the status it had before Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. In Ellul's hands 2Kings is a storehouse of timeless truths that turn out to coincide with Ellul's preconceived homiletic prejudices. In his use of typology (Elisha is a figure, a type, of Christ) the distinction between New Testament and Old Testament trust virtually vanishes: "We are now confronted by the unity of this Scripture which is recognized by faith to be the one Word of God, unique, total, and complete." Israel is equated with something Ellul calls "the Church" and Rabshaken's speech to the people of Judah (2Kings 18:28-35) discloses "what will always be the world's attitude to the church and what arguments will be used to the end of history in the world's case against it. The charge which tries to divide the confessors of the faith or guides of the flock from the general assembly of God's people, so that the latter become as sheep without a shepherd and as men carried about with every wind of doctrine, is remarkably successful even to our own day."

Ellul's concern is the defense of the Church rather than, as in *The Presence of the Kingdom*, the discovery of the real, the metapolitical revolution—the defense of the Church and the authority of its pastors. Some trace of former grace remains: "The prophet plays a role which is radical and decisive and yet independent, ex-centric, and disinterested." But shades of the prison-house of orthodoxy preclude Ellul from developing what prophetic politics might mean today: Montanism, the aspiration to new prophecy, or poetry, after Christ, is a heresy, harshly condemned as "confusing prophetism with verbal delirium." Only prophets can make godly initiatives, such as Elisha's, in human history, and the last of such interventions is the death of Jesus Christ "at the intersection of history." "Here is the authentic event that takes place once and for all and can never be re-

produced. There is no other authentic event after this one, dated and known. It is quite improper to think that the event can begin in each of our lives"; the most we can attain to is to be influenced by commemoration of the Christ event. Even *imitatio Christi* is out: "All is done in Jesus Christ, in him alone, and in no other; we cannot pretend either to imitate him or reproduce him."

Since God incarnate has done all that He can do, there is nothing left for us to do: "It is all finished. We have nothing to achieve, nothing to own, nothing to provide. On this road it is not that half is done by God and half by man. The whole road has been made by God, who came to find man in a situation from which he could not extricate himself." God Himself came down to earth, and did all that can be done. The lesson of the cross is the necessity of failure: "As the world sees it, action which is faithful to God will always fail, just as Jesus Christ necessarily went to the cross." Consequently the "Politics of God" can never amount to more, politically, than the crucifixion; i.e., "as the world sees it," ineffective dissidence. Radicalism becomes "tension against the accepted line, non-conformity." *Noli conformari huic saeculo*—Be not conformed to this world (Romans 12:2). It is negation appearing in what Marcuse called the politically impotent form of the "absolute refusal." From this coincidence of Ellul and Marcuse we may infer once again that Heraclitus was right when he said the unseen harmony is stronger than the seen.

In Ellul's grim Calvinism the theology of the cross provides a justification for the holocausts of the Old Testament or of the twentieth century: "And that night the angel of the Lord went forth, and slew a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians" (2Kings 19:35), " etc. Ellul's *Te Deum* shows us where neo-orthodox rigor and consistency will take us:

At issue here is more than the war, more than the survival of Judah, more than the liberation of Jerusalem. At issue is God's honor. We observe that the miracle of God corresponds to the direct insult addressed by man to God. We ourselves need not seek means to avenge God's honor. God alone avenges his honor. We should simply bow in fear and trembling before this incomprehensible expression of the dignity of his love.

Ellul means what he says: the holocaust is an incomprehensible expression of His *love*. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son to be crucified: "And we must always bear in mind that God is not indifferent to the victims, for ultimately all the victims are *the* Victim, God's own Son." Ellul's ultimate vision of history is of an altar on which God (as priest) is sacrificing Himself (as Son) to Himself (as Father) in an eternal crucifixion: it is a return to, or surpassing of, the apotheosis of the executioner in Joseph de Maistre.

It is not just innocent victims who are the Beautiful Victim—though one

would like to see how Ellul's inflexible orthodoxy would dispose of 2Kings 2:23-4: "From there he went up to Bethel, and while he was on the road up, some small boys came out of the town and jeered at him. 'Go up baldhead!' they shouted. 'Go up baldhead!' He turned around and looked at them; and he cursed them in the name of Yahweh. And two she-bears came out of the wood and tore to pieces forty-two of the boys." "He" in this passage is Elisha, who is, remember, "a type of Christ." When Jesus said, "suffer little children to come unto me," he meant he was *not* like Elisha. It is not just innocent victims, or neutral instruments of Big Power maneuvers (Assyrian soldiery "just obeying orders") who are incomprehensible expressions of God's self-sacrificial "love"; the same applies to the guilty victims of God's just punishment: "When he inflicts chastisement on man, God himself suffers it, for he does not withdraw even from the worst of men." There follows an exegesis, which has to be read to be believed, of Jehu's slaughter of the house of Ahab and his entrapment into the gas-chamber of all the worshippers of Baal. "God took upon himself what he inflicted on Ahab, just as he took upon himself and suffered the massacre of Ahab's house according to his own judgment. When Jehu fulfilled the prophecy, it was on God himself that his violence fell. It was God whom he massacred in the priests of Baal." And not just the priests: "All the worshippers of Baal came, so that there was not a man left who did not come. And they entered the house of Baal, and the house of Baal was filled from one end to the other" (2Kings 10:21). Ellul goes on: "All the violence of Jehu is assumed by Jesus Christ. . . ." God "takes upon himself the chastisement that he wills and ordains, the chastisement of man, his suffering and his death."

Theologia cruxis ends up as holocaust theology. Too long the world has been a madhouse. It is time, or it is too late, for those who acknowledge the authority of the Hebraic-prophetic tradition to consider, and not just willfully ignore, the scandalous, the liberating, message, the good news, of the prophet Muhammad: *the crucifixion*, in the sense intended by Ellul's "Church," *never happened*. The Docetic interpretation of the crucifixion in Surah 4:156 goes with the Islamic repudiation of prophetic impotence and the reinstatement of the original full theocratic ideal. The Hegelian dialectic of the Unhappy Consciousness in the *Phenomenology*, and all the modern footnotes to Hegel, are based on ignoring the world-historical significance of Islam.¹

¹ On Docetism in heretical Christianity, Islam, and Blake see my forthcoming article on "The Prophetic Tradition" in *Studies in Romanticism*.

Part 2: Pro-Ellul

It is a lesson in the complexity of theologico-political dialectics to measure the difference between *The Presence of the Kingdom* and *The Politics of God*. *The Presence of the Kingdom* is an attempt to project a vision of "Revolutionary Christianity" (the title of the key chapter) as the only valid Christianity for our time, and as the only form of revolutionary politics worthy of the name.

Ellul starts where Marcuse leaves off: "We need a revolution, in a world in which it has become impossible."

This profound immobility, this incapacity for revolution—which is certainly the essential characteristic of our epoch—in opposition to the exasperated desire for this most necessary revolution, creates a formless kind of society. In spite of all the political struggles, which have never been so violent, in spite of apparent contradictions, there is a progress toward uniformity, an alignment of all values, of all ideologies, based upon a few essential elements of civilization.

Ellul starts from a totally realistic recognition of the automatic-systemic determinisms that are rushing modern civilization to its doom; his sociology is elaborated in *The Technological Society* (published in 1954) but the vision is already contained in the early book.

In this impasse the only moving thing is the spirit of prophecy. Only when the full force of the prophetic tradition is brought to bear upon our present situation can we recognize it for what it is—apocalyptic; that is, the world of the Last Days. To be filled with the spirit of prophecy is the very definition of a Christian (compare Blake citing Numbers 11:29: "Would to God that all the Lord's people were prophets"). Therefore, unlike *Politics of God*, in which prophecy came to end with Christ, "every Christian who has received the Holy Spirit is now a prophet of the Return of Christ, and by this very fact he has a revolutionary mission in politics."

The prophetic content is not the edification of the church but reading the signs of the times: the interpretation of history. Ellul is claiming that the prophetic tradition can generate the most realistic appraisal of our present "bleak" and "appalling" situation. A confrontation with Marxism is inevitable. Ellul may be said to have anticipated in *Presence of the Kingdom* and *The Technological Society* the crisis of intellectual Marxism exposed ten years later in the work of Marcuse; hence the coincidence between Ellul and Marcuse in their ultimate menacing judgment—the need for a revolution in a world in which it has become impossible. *One-Dimensional Man* covers the same ground as *The Technological Society*; the comparison compels one to take seriously Ellul's claim that open confession of adherence to the prophetic tradition enlarges and

deepens sociological awareness. Both Marcuse and Ellul emphasize the universal tendencies in the world system of modern civilization: the autonomous dynamic of technical development, the growth of the power of the state, the pollution of the environment, the pollution of the culture, the language, the media, the propaganda, etc. We all know the litany of commination. In Ellul's view Marxism is paralyzed—and thus absorbed into the general stasis, immobility—by its commitment to determinism, the logic of history, and material development. Ellul can thus openly develop the turn to idealism that is, not so openly, implicit in Marcuse. Ellul says:

There is a logical course of history: revolution consists in resisting this logical course (or dialectic) in the name of a truth or liberty which are endangered by "normal" development. . . . Ever since society came into existence, the revolutionary spirit, which is a necessary part of social life, has always been the affirmation of a spiritual truth against the error of the moment: a truth which is called to incarnate itself in society, not in any automatic, mechanical way, but by the desperate, sacrificial effort of man.

From what transcendent principle does Marcuse derive his categorical imperative to resist the Forces of History (no less)? Marcuse turns to the Messianic Benjamin: "It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given us."

Everything now depends on recovering freedom of the will. "Proudhon, affirming the supremacy of the human will over human conditions, calling man to struggle against his situation, is revolutionary, while Marx, who explains that inevitably, by the play of dialectical materialism, Socialist society will emerge from Capitalist society, is anti-revolutionary." If something like a "desperate sacrificial effort" is called for, the Bible and the prophetic tradition have not been superannuated by the classics of scientific socialism. Marxist notions of human psychology are so constricted by materialist and determinist assumptions that they cannot liberate but must be liberated by an infusion of what Ellul would call Christian liberty: that is to say, respect for soul and person. Otherwise Marxist propaganda is indeed just materialist machinery.

Everything depends on recovering freedom of will. Everything depends on a recovery or rediscovery of the lost soul of modern man: "In a civilization which has lost the meaning of life" . . . "confronted by an enormous machine, equipped to prevent man from becoming aware" . . . living in a perpetual dream or world of shadows. . . "in no other civilization has man been so totally repressed." The first and quintessential message is the old prophetic call, Sleepers awake! Or, choose life as against death: "See I have set before thee this day life and good, and death

and evil. . . . I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before thee life and death, the blessing and the curse: therefore choose life, thou and thy seed" (Deuteronomy 30:15).

The Bible enables Ellul as it enabled Blake to see it and say it: "Here we come upon one of the characteristics of our day: the will-to-death, one of the forms of universal suicide toward which Satan is gradually leading man. Satan makes people gradually get used to this idea of suicide: suicide in enjoyment or in despair, intellectual or moral suicide; and thus people are ready for the total suicide which is slowly preparing, and will involve the whole world, body and soul." But we are too enlightened to accept the reality of a death instinct, even when offered to us by the master of enlightenment, Freud. Ellul calls it Satan. A master text for him as for Blake is Ephesians 6:12: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the Sovereignities and Powers, the rulers of the darkness in this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens." It is not immediately clear that the image of Satan is less useful as a way of envisaging the forces that are running this world than, say, Freud's Eros and Thanatos—mythological beings, he calls them, "superb in their indefiniteness." Any serious student must recognize the retreat of the human imagination before the forces of darkness in modern times; the less than total success granted to both Milton and Blake in their tremendous efforts to renew the Hebraic-prophetic tradition in its capacity to envisage Sovereignities, Powers, the rulers of the darkness of this world. But it cannot be said the recourse to Greek mythology has been more successful.

"To choose life"—it is a question of changing the deep structure of modern civilization. This change will not come about by automatic-mechanical development; not from technical solutions as if it were a technical problem, but from some mass movement, some Great Awakening. It is a question of breaking with the bourgeois style of life that has succeeded in enveloping Marxism, artistic avant-garde, and all other would-be revolutions. There is an ultimate question of reference to authority, or allegiance to a Lord, that cannot be evaded. Is it or is it not true that no man can serve two masters? Matthew 6:24 is one of these prophetic texts that have passed into selective use in the debased currency of semi-secular radical rhetoric—you cannot serve God and Mammon. But the point is that you have to serve. A master. "Henceforth be mastered," D.H. Lawrence ends a chapter on Caliban and "Henceforth be masterless" in America. Even pagan polytheists know that without gods there is no culture; the prophetic tradition insists that there is no god but God; there is a choice to be made, and only one solution: theocracy. "Thy kingdom come." To "bring the whole sphere of technics under His judgment and His control."

To choose life: to be alive; to *be* rather than to act or do. The injunction is to "make every moment apocalyptic"; "bringing the future into the present as an

explosive force”; “bringing into the actual world of today elements which belong to the *eschaton*”; “actualizing the *eschaton*.” The apocalyptic vision contradicts teleology in both the technological form of the subordination of means to ends and in the progressivist form of the subordination of the present to future.

In *Presence of the Kingdom* (a final contrast with *Politics of God*) Ellul deduces from the unprecedented character of our present crisis the need for what from the theological point of view would amount to a new Pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit, a new prophetic era, with a new language, and a new style of life. Christian intelligence is transformed into poetry: “But the characteristic work of the Christian intellectual is to discover a new language, a language which helps men to understand one another, in spite of publicity, a language which permits men to abandon their despairing solitude, and avoids both rational sterility and subjective emotionalism.” Ellul even invokes the spirit of Mallarmé: “The search for the new language which will give a purer meaning to the words of the tribe.” The last word is given, as it were, not to John Calvin, or Karl Barth, but William Blake. Or Ernesto Cardenal, and *The Gospel in Soletiname*.