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Jacques Ellul and Francis Schaeffer: Two Views of Western Civilization

Western civilization is in a state of intensifying crisis today. The roll call of challenges we face is so often repeated in news stories, books of social criticism and, indeed, personal experience that our sensitivity to the urgency and magnitude of this crisis can become somewhat dulled. What is particularly ominous about the contemporary situation is the fact that the non-Western world is inextricably entangled with the West. The crisis of the West is emphatically a global crisis. Unlike past eras it is hardly possible today that some other society will rise as ours falters. Ecologically, economically, politically, militarily, and, in certain key respects, ideologically, our earth has but one future, not several.

One of the most serious obstacles to any amelioration of the crisis of the West is what the American social and intellectual historian Christopher Lasch in his recent book *The Culture of Narcissism* has called "the waning of the sense of historical time."¹

To live for the moment is the prevailing passion — to live for yourself, not for your predecessors or posterity. We are fast losing the sense of historical continuity, the sense of belonging to a succession of generations originating in the past and stretching into the future.

This rejection of the past has not resulted from careful or widespread study of our predecessors. On the contrary, pathetic ignorance of history is characteristic of modern men and women, university-trained or not. Unfortunately, it cannot be said that Christians have evidenced any particular immunity from these trends either. The general ignorance of church history (not to mention world history) by church members is scandalous to a faith so rooted in human history.

In these circumstances, Christian historians have both the potential and the responsibility of playing a decisive role. As *historians* they examine the fabric of history leading up to the present and, in so doing, illuminate the roots and constituent factors of our contemporary crisis. As *Christian historians* they are delivered from despair by their

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awareness that the power of God is greater than the powers of evil and death — that God can and will act in our time of troubles just as he has in many different ways in the past. As *members of the people of God* they remember, teach and obey God's command: "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jeremiah 29:7).

Historians, like biblical scholars, sociologists and others, are urged by training, at least, to be specialists in fairly narrowly defined areas. This kind of detailed work is clearly necessary and it has advanced our knowledge of history considerably over the past century or so. Nevertheless, for the sake of the world and the Church, some Christian historians must turn from the "trees" to the "forest". A broad-ranging, academically responsible interpretation of the history of the West and the multifaceted relationship of Christianity to that history could be a significant help to Christians who choose to seek the welfare of our troubled city of the West.

Two Christians who have recently undertaken just such a task — a description of the "forest" and the fires which now threaten — are Jacques Ellul and Francis Schaeffer. There are some interesting similarities between the two authors, beginning with the fact that they were both born in 1912. Both are outspoken men of faith, concerned about the shape of the world and the church. Both deplore the all-too-common privatization of the Christian faith and the apparent conformity of the Church to the world. Both are by nature intellectual swashbucklers rarely hesitant to make strong personal judgments or engage in a bit of rhetorical overkill. Both are "prophets" whose audiences divide into hostile critics and true believers. Both write from Europe but with their strongest influence in America.

The differences between Ellul and Schaeffer are equally striking. Francis A. Schaeffer is the founder and leader of an evangelistic/apologetic ministry to students called "L'Abri" in Huemoz, Switzerland. Over the past thirteen years he has produced some twenty books and pamphlets which have a combined sale of over two million copies in English alone.² Schaeffer was trained at Westminster and Faith Seminaries during the Thirties and in 1953 received his honorary doctorate from Carl McIntire's now-defunct Highland College of Glendale, California. For the sake of comparison with Ellul it is worth noting that Schaeffer considers Karl Barth and Soren Kierkegaard to be supreme villains and enemies in the history of theology and philosophy.

Jacques Ellul is professor of the history and sociology of institutions in the faculty of law and economic sciences at the University of Bordeaux, France. He has degrees in law, history, and sociology, culminating with the Doctor of Laws degree earned at Paris in 1936. Like Schaeffer, Ellul has received an honorary doctorate — in his case from the University of Amsterdam. Ellul has produced more than thirty books since the end of World War Two, half in sociology and history, half in theology and ethics.³ As a respected but controversial lay theologian, Ellul has edited the journal *Foi et Vie* since 1969. In total contrast to Schaeffer, Ellul considers Karl Barth and Soren Kierkegaard to be great heroes, prophets and guides!

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Francis Schaeffer began his challenge to historians of the West with his two popular books *The God Who Is There* and *Escape From Reason* — both studies published in 1968.⁴ In 1976 Schaeffer published his largest and most ambitious study, culminating forty years of research: *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture*.⁵ Like Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* Schaeffer's book is companion to a film series, which has been shown in churches and auditoriums around North America. Though his publisher (and many of his avid readers) have unhesitatingly proclaimed him as the "foremost evangelical thinker of our day," the critical reception given to Schaeffer and his work has been rather negative.⁶

Jacques Ellul has published several historical studies, most notably a five-volume *Histoire des Institutions* covering the period from ancient Greece to the onset of World War One.⁷ His best known and most provocative study of contemporary Western civilization is *The Technological Society*.⁸ For the purposes of this present essay Ellul's sociology of religion, *The New Demons*, his recent study, *The Betrayal of the West*, and the theology of history in his *Apocalypse* will also loom large.⁹ Ellul has no film series but he was recently the subject of an insightful five-part series of interviews-with-commentary on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's radio program, "Ideas."¹⁰ Though many scholars (and publishers and devotees) have praised Ellul as "the Protestant for our time" and similar encomiums, he has been damned by many others as a crank and a misguided, one-eyed prophet.

Such is the fate of all prophets — to divide as well as inspire, to win disciples while dodging stones. Considerations of detail aside for the moment, both Schaeffer and Ellul must be applauded at the beginning as well as the end of this essay for having the vision and the courage, at least, to attempt this "Toynbee-esque" project of interpreting the history and present plight of the West. Nevertheless, legitimately or not, well or poorly, these two prophets have galloped about in the territory of the historian — and must be evaluated as such. This is all the more essential because they have entered the Church as teachers (not many will be prepared to distinguish prophetic license from authoritative teaching) and, just as importantly, they speak to the world in the name of the faith.

For the sake of comparison, and to give some order to this analysis, the following three questions will guide the remainder of the essay. First, how do Ellul and Schaeffer approach the issue of historical explanation (and causation)? That is, what is their philosophy of history and, not least, where does God figure in this process? Second, how are we to understand the critical period of the "fall of Rome" and the beginnings of Western Christendom? Third, how are we to interpret the modern "fall of Christendom" — not just in the formal, political sense but in terms of our contemporary "post-Christian" era — which is bound up in some sense with the present crisis of the West. Clearly, these are only three of many questions to be answered by those who take on the challenge of writing the history of the West. The choice of these three points is not arbitrary, however, for they are of decisive importance in the whole endeavor.

Historical Explanation

Any historical study has as one of its aspects a working methodology or set of assumptions about such key factors as God, human nature, historical causation, and so forth. Naturally, there is some kind of reciprocal influence between the interpretive method and the data of history. Since I am not a historiographer I will not attempt to set the stage any more carefully than this.¹¹ The questions to be addressed are as follows: what are the interpretive keys or sighting points to which Ellul and Schaeffer appeal in their histories? what aspects of human nature and experience do they emphasize and what do they deemphasize? where does God fit into this picture?

Francis Schaeffer's answer to this kind of questioning is very straightforward: "People are unique in the inner life of the mind — what they are in their thought world determines how they act." "As a man thinketh, so is he," is really most profound. An individual is not just the product of forces around him." "The inner thought world determines the outward action."¹² These assertions at the beginning of *How Should We Then Live?* are, in substance, repeated over and over again. Furthermore, Schaeffer consistently works by the principle contained in these statements.

That this approach is not a new departure for Schaeffer is clear. In 1968, Schaeffer uses the same language in *Escape From Reason*: "men act the way they think."¹³ In

Schaeffer's 1968 books he describes "the origin of modern man" by developing a historical "line of despair" from Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) to the present. What is emphasized above all is the history of philosophy, especially epistemology. Change and development in Western philosophical thought proceeds in the following causal sequence: Aquinas's ideas lead to Renaissance and Reformation ideas which lead to Kant's ideas which lead to Hegel's ideas which lead to Kierkegaard's ideas, etc. "One man would draw a circle and say 'You can live within this circle.' The next man would cross it out and would draw a different circle. The next man would come along and, crossing out the previous circle, draw his own — *ad infinitum*"¹⁴ In addition to this sequence within the history of philosophy, "this new way of thinking spread in three ways": geographically, socially (from intellectuals to the masses), and "by disciplines... philosophy, then art, then music, then general culture... Theology comes last."¹⁵

With respect to God's identity and role in history, Schaeffer avows "historic, biblical orthodoxy." When Jesus Christ is mentioned in Schaeffer's various works, however, and this is rare, it is usually with reference to his work in atoning for our sins. The "God who is there," of course, figures big in Schaeffer's approach. He is simultaneously infinite and personal, has provided the Bible, and is the foundation of a Christian world-view. While Schaeffer has strongly emphasized the importance of a living demonstration of Christian truth, there is no question that Schaeffer is primarily occupied with Christianity as a way of thinking. "Christianity created a climate of thought..." "Christianity is a system which is composed of a set of ideas which can be discussed... The beginning is the existence of the infinite-personal God as Creator of all else."¹⁶ The "Christian base" to which Schaeffer refers so often, is this set of ideas or presuppositions. It is the intellectual "base" of a culture which gives rise to virtually everything else.

Schaeffer's consistent emphasis on the importance of *ideal* factors (reason, ideas) in historical development is an important contribution. He is a feisty opponent of all forms of behavioristic social science and historical materialism (which, in comic form, is "You are what you eat" as opposed to Schaeffer's "You are what you think"). The weakness of this approach may be described in two terms: *reductionism* and *elitism*.¹⁷ An idealist reductionism is not an adequate answer to a materialist or positivist reductionism. Both the Bible and common sense experience indicate the unacceptability of this sort of reductionism. Ideas are significant — but so are earthquakes, famines, plagues, social conditions, personal charisma and so forth. And is God best described as a presupposition or even the provider of presuppositions? Schaeffer's Christology, while presumably robust in theory, is rather thin in practice. The problem of elitism follows from that of idealist reductionism: while their influence may be disproportionate to their members, philosophers, artists, composers, intellectuals and theologians do not always or necessarily provide the best indices of historical reality.

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Like Schaeffer (and, for that matter, Toynbee and other macro-historians), Jacques Ellul has certain more-or-less constant themes and points of reference in his historical interpretation. Although he too is open to the charge of reductionism, Ellul provides a somewhat richer, more complex understanding of the dynamics of history. In simplest terms, history develops out of the dialectical relationship of necessity and freedom. The corresponding theological terms are the "powers" and the Word of God. The individual is the point of contact and struggle of these adversaries.

In distinction from both a view of nature and history that presupposes radical freedom and autonomy for the individual and an alternative perspective assuming the total determination ("fate") of human life, Ellul defines the "universe of necessity" in which we live. Necessity means that

several forces act on man but we cannot say that they represent the totality of his universe or that they condition directly and immediately his whole life and work. . . . I do not view either man or society mechanistically. But I have to accept the fact that there are necessities which we cannot escape.¹⁸

Thus, history is a product not only of conscious reflective individuals acting in accordance with their intellectual presuppositions but also the forces of nature, culture, unconscious motivation, group membership, and so on. Not least, as we shall see, are the artificial techniques of determination. History, then, is the story of God and man in the universe of necessity.

Theologically, Ellul believes that these forces of necessity include what the Bible describes as "principalities and powers."

The Bible speaks of forces which subjugate man. These are distinct from the flesh, which in some sense assimilates itself to man. They are not just evil and rebellious powers. They are not just powers which scripture has rightly or wrongly, realistically or mythically, personalized. . . .

The powers seem to be able to transform a natural, social, intellectual, or economic reality into a force which man has no ability either to resist or to control. This force ejects man from his divinely given position as governor of creation. It gives life and autonomy to institutions and structures. It attacks man both inwardly and outwardly by playing on the whole setting of human life.¹⁹

In his recent study of the Book of Revelation, Ellul interprets the "sealed book" (the scroll) which only the Lamb can open, as the book

which contains the design of God for man and reveals the meaning of what happens, the meaning of history, and that history is not the result of chance, of the ensemble of automatisms, but the result of the interplay between the will of God (which is the love of God and not his imperative power), the will of men, and a certain number of abstract forces.²⁰

The six seals "give the components of history" leading to the seventh seal which sounds the trumpets and brings on the "ultimate secret." The first four seals evoke the "four horsemen" who are "the four chief components of history. . . . at work always, in all epochs, and in all regimes."²¹ In brief, the white horse represents the Word of God, the red horse represents the state and political power, the black horse represents economic power, and the pale horse represents the power of death. To these forces are added the fifth seal, the prayers of God's witnesses, and the sixth seal which brings about the cataclysms and the appearance of the people of God.²² Once again, Ellul notes that these forces do not show themselves in a systematic causal nexus but that, nonetheless, Jesus Christ reveals this ensemble as the summary key to the meaning of human history.

Within the history of the Greco-Roman-Hebrew-Christian West, this general perspective gets applied as follows.²³ The legacy of Greece and Rome to Western civilization consists in their development of the human "will to power," in learning how to dominate life and the world. In the case of Greece, this was developed in terms of intellectual domination; Rome developed political and social domination to unparalleled new heights. Into this Greco-Roman context came the Christian Gospel. Eros, the will to power, was confronted by Agape, the will to loving servanthood. The history of the West is the history of the multi-form results of this conflict of Eros and Agape.

The role of God in history, for Ellul, is summed up in the description "Wholly Other." God breaks open the determinations and necessities of human existence, thus introducing freedom and hope. The paradigm for God's action in history is always the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Word of God enters into human flesh and circumstance ("appropriation"); then there is "contradiction" — the difference between the content of revelation and that of the particular culture becomes apparent"; finally, there is "ex-

propriation" — the cultural schema or concept is absorbed and expropriated in favor of the revealed sense.²⁴ While this three-step process is given by Ellul in the context of a description of the Bible, it applies as well to any action of God in history.

While God's action is seldom spectacular it is profoundly and radically contradictory to this world of the fall and necessity. The power of this concept is considerable — especially in an era characterized by the conformity of the Church to the world. Nevertheless, Ellul's view of God (in history) sometimes neglects the themes of appropriation and expropriation, as he has called them, for a monotonal sounding of the contradiction theme. In so doing, some will argue, he has engaged in a reduction of God's participation in history.

If one question about Ellul's historical theory is his possible reductionism, the other concerns the relationship of his historical to his theological method. Ellul's biblical theology of history and his "secular" sociological study of history have remarkable similarities in method and conclusion. He has insisted that he "wears two hats" — as a sociologist/historian and as a theologian — and that he refuses to allow one approach to prejudice the other.²⁵ The correspondence is too obvious, however, and Ellul will do Christian historians a favor someday if he will address the theoretical and practical issues of the integration of the two areas.

The Fall of Rome

As a sample of historical research and interpretation, let us see how Schaeffer and Ellul deal with the fall of Rome. As suggested earlier, this event and its broader context are of particular importance in any interpretation of the history of the West. Popular preachers and moralizers frequently compare (with little elaboration) the sickness of the contemporary West to that of the late Roman empire. More importantly, in my view, the fall of Rome is tied up historically with the replacement of a pagan culture by an ostensibly Christian culture.

Schaeffer's explanation of the fall of Rome is quite simple: "A human god is a poor foundation and Rome fell." "Rome did not fall because of external forces such as the invasion by the barbarians. Rome had no sufficient inward base."²⁶ The evidence cited by Schaeffer is as follows:²⁷ (1) The pagan Roman gods were not big enough — not infinite — and thus were not a "sufficient reference point intellectually" and were an insufficient base for life, morals, values, and final decisions; (2) The authoritarian, deified emperor was also an inadequate foundation — from Augustus (d. 14 A.D.) onward; (3) As Fellini has reminded us in his movie *The Satyricon*, the classical world "was both cruel and decadent as it came to the logical conclusion of its world view." We must note, for example, the popular "phallus cult" in Pompeii (1st C., A.D.); (4) Apathy on a general scale characterized artists, musicians, and the general populace during the late (4th C.) empire — to which the government responded with ever more authoritarian and repressive government.

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28 The problems with this scenario (and thus, with the method underlying it) are severe. First, the evidence cited by Schaeffer suggests exactly the opposite of the conclusion he draws. Far from accompanying the fall, the pagan pantheon, the authoritarian imperial office, and moral decadence accompanied (or even preceded!) the *rise* of Rome.²⁸ The point can be made in another way: if the absence of a "Christian base" accounts for the decline of Rome, what "base" accounts for its phenomenal rise? If the fall of Rome is in any sense to be regretted, should we not discover (and reproduce?) the base which gave rise to it?

Secondly, what does Schaeffer mean by the "fall of Rome?"²⁹ Does he mean the traditional event of 476 A.D. when the Scirian leader Odovacar forced Augustulus to

abdicate in Rome? Any response to this question must account for the survival of the Eastern Empire, headquartered in Constantinople, until 1453 (is Eastern orthodoxy a better Christian "base"?). Something must also be said about the way in which Roman law, political administration, and other significant aspects of her culture, survived into the Middle Ages and became a fundamental part of the heritage of the West.

Thirdly, Schaeffer neglects to deal with the most interesting and significant issue of all: the relationship of Christianity to the decline of Rome in the fourth and fifth centuries. The fact is that after the conversion of Constantine in 312 A.D. there began a massive effort to do precisely what Schaeffer seems to call for, i.e., place society on a "Christian base." Constantine went so far as to build a shining new capital at Constantinople, which was to be a truly "Christian" city — the New Rome.³⁰ Most impressive of all was the effort by Theodosius I (died 395 A.D.):

Constantine had thought of Christianity as a tonic, to be administered in carefully regulated doses to the debilitated body-politic. What Theodosius proposed was not so much a tonic as a blood-transfusion, as the only possible means of restoring to the *polis* something of the vitality which, in the interval since Constantine, had passed from it to the *ecclesia*. And therein he was sustained by a firm belief that in Orthodox or Trinitarian Christianity was to be found a principle of political cohesion, acceptance of which would ensure to the empire a finality in keeping with her secular claims.³¹

Far from an apathetic descent into old age and death, the later Roman Empire was the subject of a great, energetic struggle, the result of which calls into serious question Schaeffer's program of cultural/societal reclamation.

Despite the fact that Schaeffer periodically drops the name of St. Augustine, he has apparently not studied Augustine's *magnum opus*, *The City of God*. Only a few years after the death of Theodosius I, the accusations were loud that precisely this century of efforts to Christianize the empire was to blame for its troubles. *The City of God* was Augustine's answer: Christianity had nothing to do with either the rise or fall of Roman civilization. Kingdoms rise and fall for various reasons. Rome had risen because its leaders were willing to "suppress greed for money and many other faults in favor of that one fault of theirs, the love of praise."³² Providence works behind the scenes in mysterious ways. "Let us not then faint, my brethren: an end there will be to all earthly kingdoms."³³ The point in citing Augustine here is simply that to approach things as Schaeffer does (the "Christian base" argument) is not only historically erroneous, it may also backfire on us as an apologetic tactic.

Jacques Ellul's discussions of the decline of Rome and the beginnings of medieval Christendom are considerably more complex than Schaeffer's. As indicated in the preceding discussion of Schaeffer's work, any attempt to "learn" from the decline and fall of Rome must also be willing to learn from its rise. In short, the "greatness and hidden thrust" of Roman civilization was its expression of a "will to power" (Eros) in terms of political and social domination.³⁴

The Romans certainly showed a political, juridical, and administrative genius never matched elsewhere. . . . Everything that can be said and done in the political, administrative, and juridical spheres was said and done at Rome: subtle balances; juridical inventions that were applied concretely and sufficed to make political justice coexist with order; constant renewal of institutions, not by an absurd proliferation of new ones but by a development of the old ones to fit new situations; the invention of the overall concept of the state (an invention that determined the political destiny of the West); broadening of participation in the popular will; assertion of the superiority of law over the ruler's will; etc.³⁵

In particular, "everything in Roman society was related to Roman law in its multiple forms, both public and private."³⁶ During the period in which Rome flourished (from the second century B.C. to the second century A.D.), this legal technique manifested

four important characteristics: (1) it received disciplined formulation in relation to concrete situations in society; (2) Roman organization sought an equilibrium between the technical and human factors; (3) The precise goal toward which Roman technique was directed was the internal coherence and cohesion of society; (4) While constantly being adapted to changing circumstances, Roman judicial development maintained a clear continuity from stage to stage.

Certainly there were many other factors involved in the rise of Roman civilization, and Ellul does not overlook these, especially in his *Histoire des Institutions*. So also in its decline, "L'Empire romain d'Occident s'est desagregé pour des raisons internes et pour raisons externes."³⁷ Among these problems were a series of economic challenges having to do with lowered production, a radical reduction of the number of slaves during the fourth century which created shortages and uncertainties in the labor pool, and so on. The growing problem of bands of robbers within the empire and armies of barbarians threatening the borders were also significant in the fall of Rome.

The primary explanation of the fall of Rome, however, has to do with two, often inter-related, developments: one in the state and the other in the church. The period from 306 to 476 Ellul describes as "La Sclerose des institutions."³⁸ The Roman genius for social, political, and legal techniques began to break down and in its place the state became more authoritarian, centralized, and totalitarian. The state intervened more and more in the economic crisis — but created as many (or more) new problems as it solved. In this context, the empire would be unified during the rule of ambitious and energetic emperors (such as Constantine and Theodosius) but increasingly divided and chaotic under others.

In contrast to Schaeffer (who argues that Rome fell because it was *not* Christian) and to Augustine (who argues that Christians were good citizens with no detrimental influence on Rome), Ellul suggests that "it is no coincidence that Rome declined as Christianity triumphed."³⁹ Part of this has to do with the adverse effect of Christianity on both slavery and the military machine. Also, as the Church became stronger, a crisis of political leadership developed:

De moins en moins, par exemple, les intellectuels s'intéressent au droit pour se passionner de théologie. De moins en moins on cherche à entrer au service de l'Etat, on préfère entrer au service de l'Eglise, etc. Il se produit ainsi une certaine crise des élites dans le cadre de l'Etat.⁴⁰

On a general level, too, the people were less and less inclined to focus their interest on the state and practical activity. When they did attend to such practical matters, Christians were predisposed to pass moral judgment on them. "The question 'Is it righteous?' was asked of every attempt to change modes of production or of organization. That something might be useful or profitable to men did not make it right or just."⁴¹

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30 Thus, in Ellul's interpretation, the decline and fall of Rome and the development of medieval world represents above all a particular chapter in the brutal conflict of Greco-Roman Eros with Christian Agape, with the former sustaining some critical wounds. But what of the latter? Certainly it was an advantage that the church was no longer a persecuted minority. In its concern for the weak, for the suppression of slavery, for the "just price," for the prohibition of usury, and in other ways the triumphant Church was able to give expression to its Agape on a broader level. However, though its position became unavoidable and its motive of extending the Lordship of Jesus Christ was laudable, the Constantinian Church was itself wounded in the conflict and its resolution.

Among the consequences for the Church were the assimilation of various sacral,

religious, and magical elements into Christianity, the displacement of individualized faith by formalized mass Christianity, the adaptation of the Church to the authoritarian and totalitarian methods of the State, the suppression of freedom of conscience of Christians as well as heretics and schismatics, the entry into the Church of large numbers of unbelievers wishing only to avoid persecution, the loss of conscience about wielding the sword in the name of Christ, and so on. In short, the price of victory and social responsibility was a vast accommodation of the Church to the world.⁴²

Ellul's discussions of the fall of Rome and the beginnings of Christendom are extremely promising and stimulating. The major problem, from the standpoint of our quest for an adequate Christian interpretation of the West, is the fact that his interpretation must be excerpted from several different places in his writings, some of which are not very accessible to the Christian reading public. While various parts of Ellul's analysis will be debated by Christian historians, in particular his approach to the thorny question of relating Christianity to culture and the state, he has opened up the subject, examined a wide variety of historical data, and creatively engaged with the issues both as a historian and a Christian. Ellul, in contrast to Schaeffer, tempts us to "stand on his shoulders" and go further — rather than provoking a demolition job.

The Contemporary Crisis of the West

When we turn our attention to the present situation, Schaeffer lists several phenomena of special concern to him: "the majority of people have adopted two impoverished values: *personal peace* and *affluence*"; education and work have become meaningless and ugly; escapist drugs and sex and a hope-less apathy grip modern youth; relativistic law and ethics threaten the unborn and the aged; the apathy of the "silent majority" opens the way for an arbitrary exercise of authoritarian rule by some elite; economic crises, the threat of atomic warfare, the growing violence within and between nations, and loss of individual freedom all loom on the horizon.⁴³

These challenges are real enough in themselves but Schaeffer argues that the fundamental problem, underlying all of the above, is the loss of the "Christian base" in the West. Through a survey of the historical development of philosophy, science, art, music and theology, Schaeffer attempts to trace the demise of this Christian world view and describe the world view which has become the treacherous base of the West today. Essentially, this modern world view is composed of two "stories": the "lower story" is the realm of reason, logic, and science. The rationalistic humanism which rules this story, for all its technological triumphs cannot generate either meaning or moral absolutes. Pessimism about life and relativism in ethics are the implications of modern humanistic, scientific rationalism. Since human beings cannot bear to live without meaning, but cannot find it through reason and science in their modern forms, they quest for it in the irrational and non-logical "upper story." Drugs, mysticism, occult religious experience, absurdist art and music, and existentialist "encounters" are examples of the upper story phenomena.⁴⁴

It is this separation of the two stories which puts the West morally and psychologically at sea. There are no absolutes to guide either personal or social life. It is precisely biblical Christianity which offers a world view uniting reason and faith, grace and nature, science and morals, work and meaning, etc. Thus, there is only one solution to the crisis of the West, i.e., "our society once again affirming that base which gave freedom without chaos in the first place — God's revelation in the Bible and his revelation through Christ."⁴⁵ This "means that individuals come to the place where they have this base, and they influence the consensus. *Such Christians do not need to be a majority in order for this influence on society to occur.*"⁴⁶

Christians must not only "know the right world view" but act upon it to influence society "in all its parts and facets" as much as we can, individually and collectively. That means speaking and acting against racism, economic injustice and, not least, authoritarianism in government.⁴⁷ The thrust of Schaeffer's work implies the following strategy: (1) the correct world view (presuppositions, ideas) must be formulated and articulated in a persuasive manner — and competing, inadequate world views must be exposed as unsatisfactory and dangerous; this is essentially a task for Christian intellectuals. (2) Christians ought to engage in appropriate evangelism and apologetics to enlarge the minority of Christians in the culture. (3) Christians must express their soundly-based world view in all areas of their lives, including art, music, labor, personal relations, life style, etc. (4) Christians should become politically and legislatively active in reforming law and public policy according to the absolutes of Scripture.

There is much in Schaeffer's analysis and prescription that is commendable. Certainly both rationalism and irrationalism are dead ends for modern man and society. Certainly authoritarian government, moral chaos, and propagandistic news reporting require vigorous responses. Certainly Christian intellectuals must restate biblical truth for our generation in ways that illuminate all of life. Not least, Christians must be shaken out of their affluent quietism and act in the public arena out of love for God and their neighbors. Schaeffer has plowed up a field neglected by Christians for too long. If others will enter that field and take on his task, he will have succeeded on the most important level and a multitude of errors may be forgiven.

But a multitude of errors of fact and errors of interpretation remain. The evaluation given to his interpretation of the fall of Rome can be no better than that given to other sections of his work. Errors of fact abound with depressing frequency, some trivial, some momentous. Errors of interpretation are just as common. Two major suspicions are raised again and again. First, Schaeffer's philosophical/theological approach is deeply *rationalistic*, all of his qualifications and disclaimers notwithstanding. Second, his program of reform is perilously Constantinian/Theodosian/Genevan.

The question is not so much "How can we put society back on a Christian base?" as it is "How can we put the Church on a truly Christian base?" — so that individually and collectively we will be faithfully present as the salt of the earth, the light of the world and sheep among wolves. We must not repeat the Theodosian error even if it were possible (which it is not). Christendom is gone and it was at least as much a mistake as a triumph. Far better to fight for a secularized, unpretentious, pluralistic society in which we can live and witness, than to have a Genevan Consistory banning or burning Anabaptist disciples and other minorities.

Like Schaeffer, Jacques Ellul notes the various trials and tribulations of the contemporary West. And like Schaeffer, he wishes to probe beneath the surface ocean "waves" to the more determinative "main currents."⁴⁸ For Ellul, the twin demons now inhabiting the Western house (now exorcised of Christendom) are *technique* and the *nation-state*. These are the new "sacred" in the West, absolute and unchecked.⁴⁹ These are the modern forms of Eros, the will to power. The conflict between Eros and Agape has arrived at a new stage over the past two centuries. "Greco-Roman Eros has at last triumphed in our day through the general application of rationality and through the universalization of the political."⁵⁰

As the French subtitle to *The Technological Society* puts it, *la technique* is "the stake of the century." Technique is defined as "the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."⁵¹ "Technique is nothing more than *means* and the ensemble of *means*. . . Our civilization is first and foremost a civilization of means."⁵² All civilizations

have had "techniques" for accomplishing various objectives. What is significant and ominous today is that technique itself (rationality, artificiality, efficiency) has become universal, autonomous, and self-automated. "Our technical society is not a true expression of the West but its betrayal. . . what society manifests is not reason but a ^{falling} varying rationalism."³⁵ Technique — raving rationalism — eliminates aesthetic, spiritual, and relational processes. It seeks to make quantitative what is qualitative and recognizes only what can be measured.

The future of this technological society looks grim:

It will not be a universal concentration camp, for it will be guilty of no atrocity. It will not seem insane, for everything will be ordered, and the stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam. We shall have nothing more to lose, and nothing to win. Our deepest instincts and our most secret passions will be analyzed, published, and exploited. We shall be rewarded with everything our hearts ever desired. And the supreme luxury of technological necessity will be to grant the bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile.³⁴

As suggested by the last line of this statement, the various revolts today, whether political, sexual, countercultural, or whatever, are in Ellul's view contained and containable within the technological society. The irrational is the colorful "feather in the cap" of our society. What we see today around us is not too much chaos — but too little *real* chaos, in the sense of a decisive challenging of society as it proceeds with its implacable organizing, bureaucratizing, rationalizing, and so on.³⁵

The partner in crime of technique is the all-powerful nation-state, the other pole of today's sacred. Our era has seen a strong politization take place. The state becomes ever larger, proliferating bureaus and agencies, assuming more and more control over the whole life of the citizenry. Correspondingly, the individual citizens ask more and more from the government. More and more problems are treated as political problems. Political passion and participation grips the people. But while traditional concepts of political decision and action persist in the public mind, the real decision-making is taking place through inexorable technical processes within the bureaus of the government.

In this situation, the "splendid interplay of freedom, reason, self-control, and coherent behavior" which has been the greatness of the West, is undone.³⁶ Reason and history have been betrayed by the rationalist and the technician; the individual has been betrayed by the Grand Inquisitor, a faceless "order" and benevolence. Even God, the Wholly Other, has been betrayed into a support for the system.

The horrors of the West (colonialism, imperialism, racism, etc.) notwithstanding, the West has a certain greatness which is being lost at a fearful price. This greatness of the West did not arise because it ever had a "Christian base" — but rather because it harbored the creative dialectic, the contradiction of Eros and Agape. In a phase, "renewing tensions" or "creating contradiction" at this most fundamental cultural level is the heart of the revolution Ellul proposes today. When addressing his fellow intellectuals, sociologists, and academicians, Ellul is most vehement in his criticism of the Left for betraying the West, above all by its betrayal of the cause of the truly poor of the world.³⁷ "If the revolution is to come, there must be a Left that is capable of the reason, individuality, and freedom so cruelly lacking in today's Left."³⁸ There is but a tiny light left in the darkness.

As a general movement, and in the institutional sense, the Christian church is enfeebled by its extreme conformity to the world, Ellul argues. At this stage, the Church can hardly be held out to the West as the great exemplar of freedom, for it is deeply technicized and politicized. Its members are more interested in enjoying the high standard of living in the West than in rocking the boat. And yet, "only in Christ and

through Christians can authentic and undeviating freedom arise, take form, and spread in the world."⁵⁹ It is finally the unleashing of the white horse — the Word of God — and the prayers of faithful witnesses that can once more "open up" the world. Only Agape is adequate to the threat of Eros.

Ellul's prescription, then, is for a renewal of prayer, a vigorous proclamation of Jesus Christ and Scripture, and a determination by Christians to live in the heart of this world but of the coming Kingdom of God.⁶⁰ This implies, in our era, a cultivation of "awareness" of the true spiritual as well as material forces shaping contemporary society. It implies a vigorous work of demythologizing and desacralizing the "new demons" in the West. It implies a radical rejection of all ideologies which are destructive of the individual and freedom. It means a radical challenging of the power of the state and the ideology of technique.

Few, if any, Christian intellectuals of this era have developed as sophisticated and powerful a critique of contemporary civilization as Jacques Ellul. None has created the broad-ranging impact Ellul has. His familiarity with historical and sociological data places him miles ahead of Schaeffer in his ability to grapple with the character of the West. His theological and biblical interpretation is, likewise, a much richer brew, better able to capture the power and life of the Word of God and see its revolutionary implications for Church and world.

Still, sophisticated or not, Ellul's interpretive framework for both the world and the Word have their weaknesses. Occasionally, Ellul seems to force the data into his framework — or belittles its importance if it doesn't fit. His insistence on the uniqueness of the Wholly other blinds him, on occasion, to the possibilities of God's incarnation or action in the "ordinary." If Schaeffer has violated the reputations of Kierkegaard or Barth, Ellul has done the same to Billy Graham and Harvey Cox (though it is through overstatement rather than fundamental misrepresentation). If Schaeffer wreaks of Theodosian zeal, Ellul often peddles pessimism and defeatism under the name of realism (though he says he is just trying to make us mad enough to do something about it). If Schaeffer has written too little, with a few bits of evidence endlessly repeated, and drawn conclusions that are inadequately supported by his case — Jacques Ellul has perhaps written too much, burying us in data and arguments over thousands of pages, and failed to really bring things together with some concrete direction.

Ending and Beginning

Both Francis Schaeffer and Jacques Ellul deserve recognition and gratitude as pathfinders in the Christian interpretation of the history of the West. We must applaud the vision as well as the fiery spirit of the American-Swiss missionary-intellectual who dared to respond to Kenneth Clark's *Civilisation* with his own ambitious book and film series and has attempted single-handedly to bring about an intellectual renaissance in the Evangelical Church. Likewise, the Bordeaux prophet-to-the-intellectuals has earned our praise for his prodigious output in sociology, history, theology and ethics — an output which sets the highest possible standards for breadth of learning, passionate faith, impact on the secular world and challenge to Christians of all stripes.

Neither Schaeffer nor Ellul, however, has gone far enough. The task of providing the church and the world with an adequate Christian interpretation of the history of the West must be undertaken by many others. Let me conclude with three observations on this task. First, the interpretation needs to be both academically and "pastorally" responsible. That is, the work must be done in such a way that it directly confronts, and is confronted by, the best contemporary historical research — not in a flight from such accountability as characterizes Schaeffer's work. But the work must also, at some stage,

be pastorally responsible, that is, accessible and helpful to thoughtful people in and outside the church. Specifically, Ellul's work is impenetrable to most people; a book and film series such as Kenneth Clark, Francis Schaeffer, John Kenneth Galbraith, Milton Friedman, Jacob Bronowski, and others have prepared meets the need.

Second, though the interpretation may be carried out primarily by one individual, it must be carried out with substantial and continuing input from colleagues. After all, to haul out my earlier analogy, the forest is composed of trees! The specialists can save the generalists from a multitude of sins. Most of the errors and overstatements of Schaeffer and Ellul are easily detectable to various specialists and their work would be radically strengthened by such consultation. It is hardly necessary to point out, additionally, that Christians as members of the body of Christ should be the first to abandon "lone ranger" careers.

Third, the interpretation should give a central place to the question of Church and society, that is, the historically shifting interaction of "Christ and culture." This is the most disappointing lacuna in the work of both Schaeffer and Ellul. Recent studies of the history of the West by Kenneth Clark (*Civilisation*) and William McNeil (*The Rise of the West*) are certainly not adequate on this subject. Sociologists and anthropologists are emphatic on the importance of religion, inextricably bound up with society and morality wherever the researcher turns. To understand the West, past and present, one cannot play down religion and religious institutions at the expense of art, music, and palace intrigue, however important the latter may be. Historians must be wary of the elitist fallacy — that the history of esoteric artists, vain political leaders, and others who have eagerly left us with their particularized records of the past is the history of the society in which they lived. We must probe more deeply and discover the history of the people, including their religion.

What the world needs, Christians have always been convinced, is Christ. The problem then becomes how best to give Christ to the world — how to verbalize the Gospel, how to actualize it in business and family life, how to bring it to bear on the social order and the general culture. If it is still true that "all members of the body are necessary" that would include those members who have preceded us. Thus, as a central part of the Christian interpretation of the West — as a contribution to our contemporary search for answers — attention should be directed at the various ways Christians have related to the surrounding cultures in which they lived. The losses and gains must be fairly and accurately presented. Our own situation would be illuminated by careful attention to the varied outworking of the Christ and culture question by (a) the early, pre-Constantinian Church, (b) the Constantinian/Theodosian/Augustinian approach, (c) the Byzantine/Orthodox approach, (d) Medieval sectarianism and monasticism, (e) Charlemagne and Carolingian culture, (f) Lutheran approaches in Germany and Scandinavia, (g) Reformed experiments in Geneva, the Netherlands, Scotland, Cromwellian England, and Massachusetts Bay, (h) Anabaptism, the Hutterites, the Quaker Holy Experiment . . . and so on. These are all constituent elements in the history of the West as well as the history of the Church, and they are the elements to which the contemporary Church must especially refer in developing its own agenda for faithful presence in our West — whether it is in its death throes or not.

¹ Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in An Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: W.W. Norton, & Co., 1979), 5.

² Thomas V. Morris, *Francis Schaeffer's Apologetics: A Critique* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1976), 12.

³ The best secondary source on Ellul is Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, editors, *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1980) to which I have contributed an extensive bibliography of works by and about Ellul.

⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968); *Escape From Reason* (Chicago: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968).

⁵ Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live? The Rise and Decline of Western Thought and Culture* (Old Tappan, New Jersey: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976).

⁶ See, for example, the reviews by Sharon Gallagher (*Radix*, March/April 1977), Jack Rogers (*Reformed Journal*, May and June 1977), Clark Pinnock (*Sojourners*, July 1977), George Giacomakis, Jr. & Gerald C. Tiffin (*Fides et Historia*, IX, 2 (Spring 1977)).

⁷ Jacques Ellul, *Histoire des Institutions*, 5 volumes, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951-1956).

⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. by John Wilkinson (Revised American ed.; New York: Alfred Knopf, 1964).

⁹ Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); *The Betrayal of the West*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Seabury Press, 1978); *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. by George W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

¹⁰ "Ideas: Jacques Ellul" — a five-part series of interviews of Ellul by Bill Vanderberg and others over the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio network, October-November 1979.

¹¹ D.W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1979) and C.T. McIntire, ed., *God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) are two of the best introductions to the general area in which this section is interested. My own interest in the subject was reflected in my unpublished M.A. thesis *Contemporary Christian Philosophies of*

History: The Problem of God's Role in Human History (San Francisco: San Francisco State University, 1971).

¹² *How Should We Then Live?*, 19, 20.

¹³ *Escape From Reason*, 27.

¹⁴ *The God Who Is There*, 17.

¹⁵ *Escape From Reason*, 43-44.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 30, 91.

¹⁷ A marvelous book, to be read by all working historians, is David Hackett Fischer's *Historians' Fallacies: Toward A Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970). Fischer discusses the reductive fallacy (173-175), the idealist fallacy (195-200), and the fallacy of elitism (230-232) with both wit and insight.

¹⁸ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. by G.W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 37-38.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 144, 152-153.

²⁰ *Apocalypse*, 146.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 150.

²² *Ibid.*, 144-170.

²³ See *Betrayal of the West*, especially 68-81.

²⁴ *Ethics of Freedom*, 164.

²⁵ See for example Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years," *The Christian Century*, 87 (1970): 200-204.

²⁶ *How Should We Then Live?*, 22, 29.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-29.

²⁸ Note, by way of comparison, the judgement of eminent Roman historian Max Cary in his *History of Rome* (2nd ed.; New York: Macmillan & Co., 1965), 698:

The serenity of the second century must not be mistaken for the feeble contentment of a comfortable invalid. To speak of a 'decay' of the Roman empire at this period would be premature. Economically the empire was never sounder, politically it was never more stable, and at the death of M. Aurelius its frontiers were as secure as ever.

²⁹ For some introduction to the complexity of this question, see Mortimer Chambers, ed., *The Fall of Rome: Can It Be Explained?* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963).

³⁰ A.H.M. Jones, *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (rev. ed.; New York: Collier Books, 1962), 192ff.

³¹ Charles Norris Cochrane, *Christianity and Classical Culture* (rev. ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 1944), 336. Cochrane's book

is a modern classic and a model for the kind of study we need for each general stage in the history of the West.

³³ St. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. by Henry Bettenson, ed. by David Knowles (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1972), 202.

³⁴ St. Augustine, *Sermons*, LV, 9-13; quoted in Henry Paolucci, ed., *The Political Writings of St. Augustine*, Gateway edition (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1962), 49.

³⁵ See *Betrayal of the West*, 68-72, and *Technological Society*, 29-32.

³⁶ *Betrayal of the West*, 70-71; *Histoire des Institutions*, II: 217-605, gives an extensive study of Roman political and social institutions.

³⁷ *Technological Society*, 30; the four characteristics discussed in this paragraph are elaborated on pages 30-32.

³⁸ *Histoire des Institutions*, III: 5. "The Western Roman empire broke up for internal reasons and for external reasons"; Ellul discusses these in III: 5-11.

³⁹ "The sclerosis of institutions" is discussed in *Histoire des Institutions*, II: 512-577.

⁴⁰ *Technological Society*, 34.

⁴¹ *Histoire des Institutions*, III: 8.

"For example, because of their passionate interest in theology, the intellectuals were less and less interested in law. They sought less and less to enter the service of the state — they preferred to enter the service of the Church, and so on. In this way it happened that there was a certain crisis of the elite in the staff of the state."

⁴² *Technological Society*, 37.

⁴³ On the matter of accommodation to the world, see *The New Demons*, 1-17; *Betrayal of the West*, 72-77; *Histoire des Institutions*, II: 516-524.

⁴⁴ *How Should We Then Live?*, 205-254.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 167 ff.; *God Who Is There*, 13-84 passim.

⁴⁶ *How Should We Then Live?*, 252.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*; Schaeffer's emphasis.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁴⁹ In his *Hope In Time of Abandonment*, trans. by C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 274-282, Ellul gives a succinct and marvelous description of the "realism" he seeks (and recommends).

⁵⁰ See especially *The New Demons*, 70-87; see also *Technological Society* and *The Political Illusion*, trans. by Konrad Kellen (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1967).

⁵¹ *Betrayal of the West*, 78.

⁵² *Technological Society*, xxv.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁴ *Betrayal of the West*, 63.

⁵⁵ *Technological Society*, 427.

⁵⁶ See Jacques Ellul, "Between Chaos and Paralysis," *The Christian Century* 85 (5 June 1968): 747-750.

⁵⁷ *Betrayal of the West*, 49.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 82-146.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁶⁰ *Ethics of Freedom*, 90.

⁶¹ Ellul's early (1948) little classic *The Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. by Olive Wyon (New York: Seabury, 1967), remains the best "first encounter" with the Ellulian program.