

Why Isn't Christendom More Christian? by David W. Gill (1985)

Review essay on Jacques Ellul, *La Subversion du christianisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), Published in *Fides et Historia* 17.2 (Spring-Summer 1985):70-77.

WHY ISN'T CHRISTENDOM MORE CHRISTIAN?

Jacques Ellul, *La Subversion du Christianisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), Pp. 247, 85 F. Frs., paperback.

Jacques Ellul's fortieth book is certain to be regarded as one of his most important and provocative works—and this from an author who specializes in provocation of both the world and the church! Indeed, within less than a year since its appearance in France, this study has provoked more than 100 letters from readers to Ellul.¹ The central question of the book is framed by Ellul as follows: "How is it that the development of a Christian society and Church have given birth to a society, civilization and culture which are the exact opposite of what we read in the Bible, of that which is indisputably the message of the Torah, the prophets, Jesus and Paul?"² In other words, why is "Christendom" (if one can still use this term) so little like biblical Christianity? This was Søren Kierkegaard's question for nineteenth-century Europe; it is Ellul who restates it in its contemporary form for twentieth-century Christians.

Americans interested in this discussion will soon be assisted by an English translation of Ellul's biblical, historical and sociological insights in *Subversion*.³ This will be no small contribution given the recent resurgence of the Christian Church in American public life. For, along with the unmistakable signs of authentic spiritual revival in many quarters, there is need for serious, well-informed analysis of the appropriate forms and movements by which the Gospel may be related to modernity, politics, economics, and the whole range of personal and public life.

Since *Subversion* is not yet easily accessible to American readers, a brief

summary of the book is in order before a few critical questions are posed in this review. In chapter one, "Contradictions," Ellul argues that there is a radical contradiction between authentic, biblical Christianity and the current shape of the Church and Christendom. It is a veritable "subversion." This is not, he argues, to be explained as another case of promising beginnings later betrayed. That is, it is not analogous to the deviations of Stalinism from Marx's original version. For, in the latter case, the deviations can be traced to roots in the original version itself. In the case of Christianity, Ellul argues, the latter deviations have nothing in common with the biblical message.

What Christianity is about in its essence, according to Ellul, is (a) the revelation of the work of God accomplished in Jesus Christ, (b) the true being of the Church insofar as it is the body of Christ, and (c) the faith and life of the Christian in truth and love.⁴ Thus defined, Christianity is in itself fundamentally subversive in relation to Mammon, political power, religion, moral systems, and fallen culture in its various forms. The Bible from start to finish reports this story of God's Word entering a given milieu and overturning the givens and the commonplaces. But now this revolutionary Word has itself been subverted, overturned, and transformed into its opposite. For example, instead of subverting religion, Christianity has become another religion and is even heralded by some of its proponents as the "best" religion.

How has this subversion taken place over the past two thousand years? Ellul makes his case in six chapters. Chapter two, "The Great Ways," explores the by-products of the successful expansion of the Gospel in the first few centuries after the close of the New Testament canon. The way of theology, for example, while understandable in light of the entry of intellectuals into the Church and the felt need for "Jerusalem" to come to terms with "Athens" (i.e., the philosophical categories of Greco-Roman thought), inevitably recast the Gospel into metaphysical, abstract, and ethical patterns. But, what God sent was a man, Jesus Christ, not a book of metaphysics. The Bible reports a history of God's Word, not a sterilized, logical system of thought. Inevitably, pagan philosophical ideas subverted the expression of the Gospel. Worse, the radically dialectical character of biblical truth was flattened out and reduced to an orderly, logical, abstract system. It was a case of good intentions and admirable energy but subversive results.

So too, on a more general level, success meant contamination and betrayal. Risk of contamination will always exist in the encounter of revelation and the world and is not an excuse for withdrawing into an enclave of the "pure" (which would be an equally serious betrayal). The problem was (and is) that contamination and accommodation occurred unchecked and even celebrated, all too often. Success meant "massification" and "institutionalization" of a movement that originally depended on deeply personal relationships of love and trust. It meant "syncretism," in that pagan ideas and practices all too often swept into the Church along with the thousands of converts. The entrance of the wealthy, powerful, and intellectual classes

mutated the revolutionary challenge the Gospel directs at Mammon, power, and the wisdom of the world. Finally, in a disintegrating Roman Empire, Christianity in the fourth century became the new collective ideology, an instrument of social cohesion. An unquenchable thirst for unity infected the Church as well as its protector and partner, the State. Under these pressures, Christianity became totalitarian (heretics and schismatics must be forcibly repressed) and syncretistic (everyone must be included provided they do not challenge the unity of the whole). At this stage, we are already far from the explosive new way of freedom, life and love proclaimed by Jesus and the Apostles. Any celebration of the expansion of Christianity must be tempered by a rigorous and sober evaluation of the cost.

In chapter three, "Desacralization and Resacralization," Ellul deals with themes he has treated at length elsewhere.⁵ Biblical faith, he argues, is radically desacralizing in effect. The Bible reveals a God who contests the pretender gods, who dethrones, unmasks, and demythologizes the world. But a resacralization has taken place under the explicit sponsorship of the Church of Jesus Christ! Sacred music, sacred buildings, sacred gestures, and sacred times, a new conception of the Lord's Supper as a sacrifice, a new conception of the pastoral office as a priesthood, a reintroduction of vestments, ceremonies, and other symbols of the sacred—all of this is a subversion of what God was doing in Jesus Christ. Not a little of this was due to the rapid influx of pagans into the Church ("Compel them to come in!") and the overnight transfer of pagan temples into church buildings. (But purged of their pagan, sacral meaning for the local population? Hardly!).

Hand in hand with all of the preceding was the rise of "moralism" (chapter four), again sponsored by the leaders of the Church. Church leaders needed to provide guidance to the faithful. But, as he has argued at length in *To Will and To Do* and *The Ethics of Freedom*, Ellul reminds us that Christianity is fundamentally anti-moralistic.⁶ That is, Christian behavior is shaped by the call to discipleship, not by the preparation of a moral code autonomous from that living relationship to God. Certainly, the Bible provides moral guidance, but it is radically subverted when translated into a moral code, a philosophical or religious system.

In a brilliant and original discussion, Ellul illustrates the baleful impact of moralism with an extended study of the role and status of women.⁷ His biblical researches are extremely illuminating on this issue. He demonstrates that historically there exists a close correlation between periods of aggressive moralism and the repression of women. Ellul's biblical and historical study of moralism and women's status deserves independent publication to give it the widest possible circulation.

No less original and impressive is his chapter five on "The Influence of Islam." Everyone knows about the influence of Islamic civilization in terms of preservation of Aristotle (thus influencing Thomas Aquinas), mathematics, and science. Ellul, a superb professional historian of institutions, discusses

several other ways in which Islam influenced Christianity to radically contradict its own Gospel. It was after contact with Islam that Christianity was subverted by elaborate canon law, the glorification of the Crusade and Holy War, and intensified quests for a natural theology, a place for mystical experience, an indissoluble bond between political power and religious authority, and an authoritarian, mechanical notion of obedience and submission. So too, in relation to slavery, colonization, and the repression of women, Christianity was the worse for contact with Islam.

Ellul's sixth chapter deals with "Political Perversion," a topic on which he has often written.⁸ In short, he argues that biblical faith is not at all apolitical but rather anti-statist and anarchist in the sense that the state and political power must be denied anything more than humble, relative, limited value and respect. Political power always threatens to become one of the "principalities and powers" of which the Bible speaks. Yet Christians have willingly promoted this idolatry and, worse, welcomed all opportunities to sleep with this seducer.

Finally, in a very modern development, Ellul argues (chapter seven) that the modern nihilism which ravages the world is attributable in part, at least, to this subversion of Christianity. In an argument a little more esoteric (and perhaps less convincing) than his previous examples, Ellul suggests that the hidden roots of modern nihilism may be (1) the successful critique of religion and morality and human pride by the Gospel, accompanied by (2) the failure to articulate adequately the new way of meaningful life and freedom in Jesus Christ. The former, without the latter, implies nihilism. The roots of this phenomenon are hidden but, in any case, the implication is clear: Christians must unflinchingly proclaim the relationship to Christ as the Good News to a society without meaning. Christianity, in its essence, is radically anti-nihilist.

Having surveyed the "how" of the subversion of Christianity, Ellul turns to the "why." In chapter eight he describes "The Base of the Problem, the Intolerable." Christians are vulnerable to subversion, they are sometimes eager to modify the message of Scripture, precisely because the Gospel is in profound conflict with personal and social life as we see it. It is not, in fact, the miraculous (for example, the resurrection) that is the scandal of Christianity, even for "modern man." Rather, the intolerable scandal is the cross. It is the message of grace and pardon from a loving God who will be our Father. This insults our pretensions to dignity, pride and self-worth. The call to non-power in a world of power-grabbing is intolerable to our notions of realistic personal and social existence. And freedom itself is intolerable: we like the rhetoric of freedom but the reality we seek is security. Thus, we must interpret, adapt, bolster, reinforce, modify . . . *subvert* the revelation of God in Jesus Christ and Scripture.

But on another level, the "why" question can be answered with a review of the biblical teaching on the "principalities and powers" (chapter nine).

These *exousia* add a "plus," something extra to the forces against which we contend. It is not merely individual, willful perversity that leads to subversion, for joined to this is the collective, structural power of evil. Ellul illustrates this with a discussion of Mammon, the prince of lies, Satan, the Devil, the prince of the world, and the power of death. With Karl Barth, Oscar Cullmann, Hendrikus Berkhof, John Howard Yoder and others, Ellul has contributed (here and in other writings) in an important way to our renewed appreciation of the relevance of the biblical teaching on principalities and powers to the twentieth century.⁹

Ellul's last word, however, is a robust affirmation of the continuing power of the Gospel throughout the centuries and into our own generation (chapter ten). In spite of all, the Church remains. And in its heart, and in the heart of the world, in the most unsuspected places, the Holy Spirit moves. Ellul mentions Francis of Assisi, Theresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Luther, John Wesley, Kierkegaard, Barth, and the Latin American Church as some examples. Today, Ellul is especially impressed with Lech Walesa and the Solidarity movement in Poland, whose nonviolence, integrity, and discernment are rooted in a profound Christian faith. He cites also the amazing revival of Christianity in the Soviet Union, especially among the Baptists, on the one hand, and the intellectuals, on the other. What could have ended as a depressing review of our failures and mistakes, instead is a ringing call to faith in the power of God's Spirit.

The Subversion of Christianity is a marvelous book and a great contribution. It is at once a very courageous, learned, and pastorally sensitive work. It is courageous because no one wants to hear bad news—it is risky to tell the emperor he has no clothes! It is risky to take on Islam and the Catholic Church—less risky to accuse us Protestants who find hand-wringing and guilt more hospitable. Yet, this is no rash or reckless case. Ellul's decades of historical, sociological, and biblical research pay great dividends in this book (it is not well known in America that Ellul is a noted historian; his five-volume *Histoire des Institutions* remains a university text in France).¹⁰ Finally, this is a pastorally sensitive work in that Ellul's own faith and concern for the church are clearly in evidence. He steers a wise course between an uncritical celebration of a triumphant Christendom, on the one hand, and an angry negativism on the other.

Three parallels are worth noting. First, the correspondence between the calling and work of Kierkegaard and that of Ellul is explicit in this volume from the page one quotation on Kierkegaard onward. Both discuss how to be a Christian in Christendom. Both use dialectical thought and paradox. Those who wish fully to understand Ellul must review Kierkegaard.

A second parallel is between *Subversion of Christianity* and Ellul's earlier book *The Betrayal of the West*, which performs the same operation on Western civilization (above all the political Left and the Western intellectual tradition) as is here performed on the Church.¹¹

The third parallel is undeveloped but most important of all. Three times, in fact, in his final chapter, Ellul suggests that a parallel study of Christian faithfulness over the generations could be written. In every century and situation there have been those who resisted evil and maintained the radical cutting edge of the Gospel. Ellul's tenth chapter is just such a study but too brief, making one long for more. Pedagogically it can be argued that "positive reinforcement" is ultimately more productive of change than negative reinforcement and scolding. The Bible itself is full of stories of faithfulness after, or amid, unfaithfulness, in trying times (think of the pedagogy of Hebrews 11 and 12, for example). In addition to Ellul's roll call of positive examples, one cannot help but think of the thriving house churches in China, of the mushrooming Christian movement in Africa, and of the incredible revival of Christianity in America just years after the foolish proclamation that "God is dead" by sophisticated moderns! Most stunning of all, from my point of view, is the biblical renewal of the Roman Catholic Church since Vatican II. It is nothing short of a miracle of the Holy Spirit.

It remains for me to pose a few critical questions, none of which puts in question the substance or importance of Ellul's volume. Indeed, one of the great joys of reading Ellul is the way he provokes, invites, even welcomes, creative engagement and criticism from his readers. I have not always agreed with Ellul; I can safely say, though, that I have never come away from Ellul book without being led, forced, teased or otherwise stimulated toward a deeper appreciation of the Word of God and a clearer perception of the world. That being the case, let me pose a few questions.

(1) Why is it necessary to concede (in a footnote) that Matthew 16:18 (On this rock . . .") is not original with Jesus? Oscar Cullmann and others have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that Jesus could have said this (i.e., its Aramaic equivalent) and that it flowed naturally from Old Testament expectation and imagery (and was not retrospectively placed on Jesus' lips by the later church).¹² As always, Ellul stresses that this text is the Word of God in any case. A small point, perhaps, but, *along with Ellul*, I resist concessions to hyper-critical textual historians!

(2) Why is it necessary to reintroduce a distinction between the Kingdom of Heaven and the Kingdom of God?¹³ Ellul promises to explain this more fully in his forthcoming *Ethics of Holiness*. He insists, in personal conversation, that there are small, but very certain, differences, detectable in the Gospel texts. As I read the texts, I doubt it! But caution and patience are in order since Ellul's insights have often, on close inspection, turned out to be brilliantly correct.

(3) In similar fashion, why is it necessary to make such neat distinctions between Satan, the Devil, the Prince of the World, and the Prince of Lies (Chapter 9)? The strength of Ellul's discussion is to help us take seriously the different biblical portraits of the Enemy. However, and in this regard I have been greatly influenced by Ellul's own discussion of the text in *Apoca-*

lypse, I believe it is more helpful to follow the lead of Revelation 12:7–10 in seeing one great enemy called Satan or the Devil (essentially the same concept but transliterated from Hebrew and Greek respectively), whose primary work is division and alienation by means of deceit (the father of lies) and accusation, who is alternately the ferocious dragon and the wily serpent.¹⁴ One notes that there are, in parallel fashion, many names for God, but this does not imply polytheism.

(4) More generally, I find Ellul's discussion of the "powers" (*exousia*) in *Subversion* less satisfying than that given in his earlier books.¹⁵ His chapter implies that there are six such powers mentioned in Scripture. From his earlier writings, as well as personal discussion of this chapter, I know his position to be much more inclusive. Almost any "ology," "ism," or institution, can be (or become) a domain of the principalities and powers. And while Ellul's discussion of the sociological nature of the powers (and also of our complicity in constituting them as such) remains very helpful, it seems preferable to me to adopt an even more open stance toward the possibility of "other realms" of being, demonic or angelic, along with the well-known sociological factors. The biblical teaching here is a considerably richer brew than either medieval demonology or modern rationalism. Ellul falls into neither category but *Subversion* sometimes sounds more sociologically reductionist than its author, in fact, is.

(5) In his discussion of the "intolerable," Ellul argues that Christianity is not merely "non-violence" but "non-power" oriented.¹⁶ But is this really the best way to put it? To be sure, "non-violence" in some expressions can be as manipulative and "violating" of others as is direct violence. But "non-power," it seems to me, does not capture best the New Testament message. We are called away from the power tactics of the world—but to the power of the Spirit, away from worldly warfare, but to the war of the Lamb, away from the weapons of the "old life" but to the weapons of the Spirit (truth, loving servanthood).

(6) So too, with the terms "morality" and "ethics," I agree with Ellul that Christianity opposes all moralism and all attempts to define the good autonomously. It risks misunderstanding to say that Christianity is "anti-morality" and not just "anti-moralism." Perhaps this is an English translation problem. In any event, Ellul (elsewhere) does offer an ethic and moral guidance.¹⁷ The power of his approach derives from its faithfulness to the Gospel, not from its reaction to other moral systems. Fundamentally, my concern is one of rhetorical strategy, not of substantive disagreement with Ellul.

(7) Finally, this book raises again the broad question of how God relates to his people and to the world. Elsewhere, Ellul describes a threefold process whereby God first "appropriates," then "contradicts," and finally "expropriates" a given historical phenomenon (e.g., the city, kingship in the O.T.)¹⁸ Has God stopped working this way since the close of the New Testament canon? Can God "seize" and "expropriate" anything from Islam? paganism?

Marxism? capitalism? technology? liberal democracy? Where, in all of this, do we locate the New Testament injunctions to "take every thought captive," that "nothing is unclean of itself," that we are corporately commissioned to "bind and loose" certain things (e.g., meat offered to idols; the observance of special days).

La Subversion du christianisme provides a sober, challenging examination of many misguided appropriations of the world into the Church. It stands as a formidable contribution to our contemporary quest for ways of thought and life that are faithful to Jesus Christ. In the end, however, its greatest virtue is the *challenge* it poses to historians and other thoughtful Christians to pursue this kind of research further, in service of the Kingdom of God.

¹ Personal conversation with the author, November 1, 1984, Bordeaux, France.

² *La Subversion du christianisme* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), p. 9. My translation.

³ William B. Eerdmans has commissioned G. W. Bromiley to prepare an English translation of *La Subversion du christianisme*. It should be published in 1985.

⁴ *Subversion*, p. 18.

⁵ Cf. *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

⁶ Cf. *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969); *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976). On Ellul's ethics, see also my *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1984).

⁷ *Subversion*, pp. 89-113.

⁸ *The Political Illusion* (New York: Knopf, 1967); *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1972); and *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 369ff.

⁹ Cf. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the*

Powers (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962); and John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972).

¹⁰ *Histoire des Institutions*, 5 vols. (Paris: Universitaires de France, 1951-56). This series has been frequently revised and republished since its original appearance. See also my article, "Jacques Ellul and Francis Schaeffer: Two Views of Western Civilization," *Fides et Historia* 13 (Spring-Summer 1981):23-37.

¹¹ *Betrayal of the West* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

¹² *Subversion*, p. 230. Cf. Oscar Cullman, *Peter* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 184ff.

¹³ *Subversion*, pp. 142, 247.

¹⁴ Cf. *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977).

¹⁵ Cf. *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 144-160.

¹⁶ *Subversion*, p. 193.

¹⁷ *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976) is the major statement. Ellul also promises an *Ethics of Holiness* and an *Ethics of Love*.

¹⁸ *Ethics of Freedom*, pp. 164ff.