

Jacques Ellul



Cain, the Theologian of 1969

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An early issue of *KATALLAGETE* will be devoted to interpretations and reflections on the social and theological writings of M. Ellul.

To me, the most striking feature in the current trends of the "new theology" is the old-fashioned quality of their efforts and constructions. It cannot be denied that most of the theological affirmations today – concerning the death of God, the primacy of the love of humanity over faith in God, the dissociation of the message (*Kerygma*) from all reality – all that was completely formulated and elucidated long ago in the works of Ludwig Feuerbach in the nineteenth century. But we should also remember that in doing so, Feuerbach in no way meant to attack Christianity. On the contrary, he meant to save what could be saved. That is to say, over a century ago Feuerbach had much the same preoccupation as our contemporary theologians, engrossed by the failure of the Gospel to communicate to modern man – a finding which again leads theologians to call into question the Gospel, not modern man. That, they feel, is their essential choice.

Without pressing the point at all, we can easily observe that the program to "demythologize" the Gospel so that it can be communicated to modern

man is not a new invention at all, but even before the creation of the scientific spirit, we find it practiced almost in the same terms and for the same reasons proposed today by the seventeenth century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes, in Book III of *The Leviathan* lays down the principles of "a new hermeneutics." As for the theology of "the death of God," it was perfectly elucidated in very modern terms by Lodovico Antonio Muratori at the end of the seventeenth century.

These little examples, which could be multiplied very easily, are not manifestations of vain erudition but are meant simply as a reminder that the "new theologies" about which so much fuss has been made in recent years, are really very, very old. If it is true that God Himself can make (and has promised to make) all things new, man does, of course, succeed in fabricating new things, but in spite of the great novelty of his scientific and technical equipment, man hardly succeeds in actually *being* new or in actually formulating his relationship to God in new terms. It is a profound error to believe that we may resolve modern man's incomprehension of the Gospel by means of the propositions of the "new" theologies, e.g., that the Gospel and man in his present situation should be brought together by new concessions by, or formulations of, the Gospel; that modern man's scientific discoveries and his self-styled "coming of age" leads to a *new* theology. Instead, I should merely like to make a reminder: that contemporary theological affirmations find their meaning and their roots in something entirely different from the scientific spirit of modern civilization. "New" theological affirmations are always the "renewed" protest by man against God, the reaffirmation of the excellence of what man does in the face of being called into question by God and, finally, the assertion of the primacy of man's intelligence over the way chosen by God for His revelation. That is why we cannot and should not put much hope in the efforts of these "new" theologies to respond to the anguish of man, or to fill the gap between the Gospel and modern society. Certainly the Bible knows about these efforts of man against God. Indeed, as the evidence shows in the accounts it transmits to us, the Bible oft times knows the precise contents of our most modern efforts. That is why Cain appears to me to be the oldest of the modern theologians.

Of course, it is necessary to leave out this account's most spectacular features — generally the only ones that are emphasized, such as God's apparently arbitrary choice in Abel's favor (a choice that generations of interpreters have tried to justify), and

the murder of Abel. In fact, the Biblical narrative is definitely much richer if one does not let himself be obsessed by these two features. So I shall concentrate upon two other aspects of the narrative. First, Cain is irritated by God's arbitrary choice of Abel, which of course is not satisfactory to Cain. But we should notice straightaway that God in no way rejects Cain: as soon as Cain manifests his anger, God speaks to him. Moreover, it is necessary to recall that whatever else it may appear to be, the Word of God is always a Gospel, a Good Word. God does not condemn Cain for his anger. Instead, He asks him a question (Why are you hot with anger?) and puts before him a commandment (get mastery over your sin). Thus, God is there, in His word; by it, Cain receives the *possibility* of fulfilling the commandment. Cain is, thereby, put to his most significant test, but he is accompanied by God Himself in this situation.

Now what does he do? First, he does not reply to God. It is exactly as if the word of God meant nothing to him. He does not take into consideration either the commandment or the promise. He does not accept interrogation by God's word. Because of this, obviously, he receives not the slightest bit of the strength which was contained in that word. So he remains "Cain-who-wants-to-be-alone," and when he speaks, he speaks not to God but, on the contrary, to his brother. I am in no sense twisting the text when I say that, in modern terms, Cain refuses the "vertical relationship" (man-God) so that he may be free to consider only the "horizontal relationship" (man-man.) Theologians of today do not want modern man, whom they say has come of age and gained dignity, to be treated paternalistically by God. Therefore, they have decided that the traditional image of the vertical relationship (man-God) must be broken, keeping only the relationship with his fellow man, and by this means alone, they say, God is discovered. So these modern theologians reproduce exactly the attitude of Cain. But if Cain discovers God in Abel (which he does), it is precisely the God he can only hate, the God he assumes has made him the victim; the unjust God, the oppressive God, the God who has wronged him. Of course, when Cain considers only the horizontal relationship (man-man), he makes an abstraction out of the question, the commandment, the promise. And he is right. And from that time on, he can only kill Abel. This is not because he is jealous of Abel, but because he tried to retain only the horizontal relationship, rejecting the relationship with God, so that Abel himself became the proof of the wrong God did to Cain.

Now I definitely do not think that today our excellent theologians of the horizontal relationship

are going to kill their neighbor. They probably would not have the courage. But they ought to understand that their theology – inspired as it is by the best feelings about man, affirming the validity of man in himself, and regarding the horizontal relationship, the dialogue, the communication, as being the special means of God's revelation – can have only that consequence. Man deprived of the vertical relationship established by God can only become his brother's murderer, precisely because he no longer has to answer any question other than the one he asks himself. It is not meaningless to observe that it is definitely in the same intellectual circles that the theology of the death of God and the theology of violence are elaborated.

We ought to retain a second aspect of the Biblical narrative: even after the murder, God continues to be Cain's protector while informing him of his new condition. Cain will be a wanderer, but he is placed under the protection of God, who puts the famous "sign" on him. Even if one does not accept W. Vischer's interpretation of it as the sign of Yahweh, of salvation and particularly of the Cross (which is a very well-established interpretation), it is the sign of the alliance that God establishes with Cain. In any event, the Hebrew word for "sign" itself derives from a verb meaning "to make an agreement with." There again, Cain does not want to know anything about this sign, this protection, this promise. Again, he rejects the vertical relationship and he takes his destiny in hand. At the same time, he refuses to accept either his situation as a wanderer (he builds a city and lives there), or his situation as a man under the protection of God. Rather, his city will be his protection, as well as the iron instruments which his descendants will forge (Tubal Cain: even the name of Cain means "lance"). All of this is placed under the sign that Cain chooses. He calls both his son and his city "Enoch," which means "initiation," and I believe that both senses of this word are meant here: "to initiate into secrets and rites" and also "to start." Cain lays down *his* beginning (opposing the one which God had decided for him) in a secret, confidential world – that is, a world closed to God. If Cain is shown to be the ancestor of the arts, technology, the sciences, animal-rearing, etc., it is not at all for the reasons given in the superficial exegesis of some modern interpreters, *viz.*, that Israel distrusted "civilization," but as the result of a much more profound insight. Insofar as the world of the arts, technology, the sciences, animal-rearing, etc., is the world of man, the world of which man wants to be the sole master, where man will assure himself of his situation and

protect himself, then only the Hero who broke the vertical relationship with God (which Adam did not do, despite the rupture) can be the initiator of it. The Biblical account is not a judgement against science and progress *but against what they signify for man in his situation of rupture with God.*

To say, as the "new" theologians say: "science has permitted man to come of age; he therefore no longer needs to take recourse to this primitive divinity, to whom he formerly appealed as a Father in order to obtain such-and-such advantage. *Now*, man is starting his own history, etc. . . ." is precisely to say that Cain has reached his summit. *As a consequence of this progress*, it is only a pretence to formulate as theology the very thing Scripture shows us to have been Cain's "theological formulation" from the very beginning, and *from which just this sort of progress resulted.* In refusing his situation, the condition made for him by God, in refusing God's beginning, and finally in refusing the grace and protection of God, it is Cain who initiates the history of humanity. But Cain thinks that he can lead history positively, for he pretends to be able to assure by his own means what God proposes. In fact, Cain succeeds. Lemach, Cain's descendent, in the "Song of the Sword," shows us that if God promised to avenge Cain seven times if he is attacked, Lemach succeeded in avenging himself seventy-seven times. His vengeance is much better, much more efficacious and much more successful than God's. And here we are in the middle of the theology of the efficacy of the human enterprise, the theology of culture and historical positivism. This always turns the argument around! For what use is it to appeal to God in a society where man is completely successful without God? And to go further: under these conditions, what place can God still have in the heart of this kind of man? most assuredly, one does not need very many theological treatises to reply: the fourth chapter of Genesis replies from the beginning: *absolutely none!* And to go still further: under these conditions, does *that* God really exist? Or does He have a reason to exist? There again one does not have to look very far. Our text replies from the beginning: for *that* man, God indeed no longer exists. The only difference is one of emphasis: man asks himself about *that* God; God questions us about *that* man. At any rate we see to what great an extent Cain is a modern theologian.

Others have already become aware of this. In fact, it is surprising that among our theologians who now glorify the fall of Adam by saying the that Fall is entirely positive, that thanks to it man has won his freedom and his initiative, no one has undertaken to

glorify Cain. But since these theologians simply reproduce the old heresies, we can be assured that this one will also soon reappear.

We know that in the second century there existed the sect of the Cainites, "because Cain made the race of the strong, Sodom terrified the world with its punishments and it is by means of Judas that God will save the world." Therefore, glory be to Cain and Judas! Cain was right to stand up to this demiurge God, who was a malevolent spirit imposing an incoherent law on man. This God must be scorned and resisted. Cain, creator of the arts and sciences, was the true emanation of wisdom and the higher principle that God, the vile pseudo-creator, wanted to upset. With other motivations and with other formulations, this is where we are today – near, very near, to this old gnostic proclamation. The Cainites had more courage and coherence than our theologians. But they acted with the same clarity – they had made their choice, a choice as false as the one which is presented to us today, because it is not between Abel and Cain, or even between Elohim and Cain. The choice is between Jesus Christ and Cain. Like the Cainites, our theologians claim to show that conciliation between the two is possible. But it is still the same error: in order to save man as he is, man with his eminent works, then only the sacrificed one, the redeemer Jesus, should be retained. All the while, an abstraction is made of the relationship between Jesus and His

Father on the one hand; on the other, the Old Testament is rejected, for the Cainites considered it to be a lying revelation of the false God, while our contemporary theologian considers it to be a collection of myths from which a reality in accord with contemporary man, can be extracted. Such a procedure, of course, allows them to ignore the little story of Cain, and to dismiss it as a myth, perhaps simply an aetiological myth of the tribe of the Kenites. Therefore, our new theologians can avoid being challenged by it.

This places us in a very comfortable situation. We can forget the Cainites and cast Cain into the aurora borealis of myth. We can ecstatically proclaim that we are in a radically new situation; that it is necessary to seek a coherent response to that situation; that modernity, secularism, rationality, science, etc., is a situation that has nothing in common with the worldview of the Bible. Therefore, we can say that it is necessary for us to extricate ourselves from all the old formulations and old theologies in order to be able at last to communicate with this man who, for the first time in history, is adult, has come of age. But it is precisely with regard to this pretension that Ecclesiastes, designating this modern adult to us as the theologians and this modern theologian as no one but Cain, replies, "Vanity of vanities . . . there is nothing new under the sun."