

Christians in the World, but not of the World

An interview with Jacques Ellul

RUSSELL H. HEDDENDORF

Born in 1912, Jacques Ellul has lived the life of a scholar and teacher in Bordeaux, France, the city of his birth. He is the author of some 40 books, which have been translated into 13 languages. Now retired as professor of law and history at the University of Bordeaux, Ellul is a leader in the Reformed Church of France and a lay theologian.

A Marxist in his teens, Ellul was converted after searching the Scriptures for answers to questions left unanswered by Marx. Once he rejected Marx, in his own words, he pledged his mind to serve nothing or no one save Jesus Christ. The result has been a series of penetrating analyses on a host of social, political, and theological issues.

RH: *We in American Protestantism have difficulty understanding how some of Jesus Christ's words should be applied in new situations. We always apply them to old situations, the ones we're familiar with. That, I think, is one of the reasons why your work has been very popular among some persons in American churches: because you provide us with new ways of looking at problems. Could you make some suggestions as to what we should do to benefit from that?*

JE: I don't think there is one general principle. In reality, in each event of life or in each responsibility that one takes on, one should have a dialectical perspective. By that I mean to be positive with regard to those with whom we work, but to convey at the same time a critical spirit—not to cut down or hinder but in actuality to help and encourage. And I'll use a phrase that I've always appreciated—"In a society like ours, we

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Ellul at home in France

need to think globally and act locally."

RH: *That comes up in one of your books?*

JE: *Perspectives on Our Age.*

RH: *Do you feel that anyone else today is following that formula of thinking globally and acting locally?*

JE: Yes, it's become something of a slogan among ecologists in France.

RH: *You have stated that someone sees farthest by looking backward. That's a very appropriate statement for someone who has tried to be prophetic. In your role as a prophet, would you have some suggestions to make to American churches?*

JE: I'm not a prophet but I believe that the American church has a very difficult role to play because to be a Christian in America is perfectly normal. And that's the same problem Kierkegaard encountered in Denmark, meaning the faithful must point out what is pagan and unsaved in entire sections of our traditional faith structure.

I wrote an article here in France asking that the socialist government, since it is a socialist government, do away with the Christian holidays. Because to

celebrate, for example, Christmas and Easter the way we celebrate them in our society becomes a form of pagan ritual. And if Christians are serious about their faith, they should refuse to celebrate these holidays in order to discover again the true meaning of Christmas and Easter. And what's amusing is that President Mitterand was on vacation near here and he happened to read the article. I'm told he was furious about it.

RH: *Some 15 years ago you expressed your feeling of frustration with the church and the state. Do you personally feel more frustration than you used to?*

JE: For the church of France, yes, much more. Because there are two separate problems: First, the authorities of the church are no longer in contact with the base of the church. The decisions are made in the National Synod and no one in the local congregation acts on them. No one's interested in them. And vice versa—the higher authorities are so out of touch with what is actually going on in the local congregations. That is my first concern.

My second worry is that the youth, although they don't totally give up their faith, no longer come to and participate in the life of the church. They get together outside of the church setting. We have in our congregation here in Bordeaux young people who get together to pray and study the Bible, and yet they never come to the Sunday morning service. They have no desire to get to know others in the congregation, including the pastor. So those left in the church are the old people.

RH: *You have written on so many different kinds of problems—the city, violence, etc. Do you see newer kinds of problems developing today that you were not writing about 10-12 years ago?*

JE: Yes, I am currently working on a very difficult project on the transformations in our modern society because of new technologies.

RH: *How do you see the new electronics—computers, robotics? Is*

this the kind of problem you're thinking of?

JE: That's right. Everything included, especially all the new genetic technology and space exploration. I would like to study and make a synthesis of these new technologies and the subsequent changes in society.

What impresses me is that the more advance the technology and the more progress we make in this direction, the less useful it becomes for man. It's fascinating.

RH: Whom do you see or what do you see as the major problem in technological development?

JE: It seems to me that the most important problem is on the human level, and the Christian has a significant role to play in this area. Modern man is becoming easily fascinated with all kinds of things. For example, the extraordinary development of electronic games. I know so many people who are so fascinated by these television games and other electronic games that they no longer have time to do anything else. And my own grandchildren love these electronic games. It seems to me that this new attitude is very dangerous. I wrote an article for a French magazine entitled "Play and We'll Take Care of the Rest." By that I meant that this is also a strategy of the government; if all the citizens are enjoying themselves playing electronic games, rather than thinking about and discussing political issues and problems, the political leaders are completely free to do as they please.

RH: This leads to another question concerning George Orwell's book "1984." One suggestion that has been made is that we should no longer fear an authority figure such as Hitler, but rather fear the electronic means by which the government controls our thinking with propaganda. You would agree?

JE: Oh yes, but this control is no longer in exactly the same form that Orwell described. You're exactly right in mentioning Hitler's power and Stalin's regime, but the current regimes and threats are more subtle and more enveloping.

RH: It's no longer just the political then; it's total?

JE: Exactly.

RH: In the light of these problems, is there any social basis for hope today?

JE: I don't have much hope, shall we say, on the "rational" level. But I stand

firm in my belief that the majority of young people in France between 15 and 25 years old have certain qualities that are extremely valuable. They're completely different from those who are 40 years old now. I don't get the impression that youth today are negative. They expect a lot of adults, and the tension is that they confront us with these expectations and question us. There is no longer the separation and gulf between the youth and adults that existed, for example, in May, 1968.

RH: In the 1980s in America, many of the young people no longer wanted marriage because they saw the divorce rate increase among their parents. They turned that off.

Would you say, then, that since there is not much hope in society, that we are, as you say in "Meaning of the City," to wait for the return of Christ rather than trying to do too much? How do we understand, in terms of Christ's return, looking for the New Jerusalem and yet having some social responsibility?

JE: Yes, there, too, I think there is not just one attitude for the Christian. There are two possible approaches. This reminds me of a movie which gives a good example of this question. There was a luxury liner caught in a storm which capsized. All the passengers including two pastors were trapped in the boat. One pastor was young and energetic, and, encouraging them not to lose hope but to find a way to escape, he takes the leadership of the young and stronger passengers to try and pierce through the hull and reach safety. It's a tragic film. The other pastor was an older man and decided he was going to stay with all the passengers who were not able to escape and were surely going to die. So he stayed with them to die with them so they could still be comforted with the Word of God. And the two pastors were right in their different approaches.

RH: This suggests your statement of the problem of doing and being. The first pastor does and the second pastor is.

JE: Exactly.

RH: So you would say that we are to do as well as to be, and we are to know when we are supposed to do one and the other. Is that true?

JE: Yes, that's necessary. But in saying that, I especially mean that a Christian must be present in society as one with a very different destiny. People everywhere are in difficult situations and the Christian has a role to play. How-

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ever, it shouldn't be assumed that "Here is the one solution to the problem that is valid."

RH: *I'd like to ask a different kind of question. In America, we put a lot of emphasis on individual sin. Sometimes it seems that in Europe there is more of an emphasis on social sin. Could you comment on the importance of individual sin and social sin?*

JE: Yes, you're exactly right. In Europe there's been a lot of struggle against this idea of individual sin, from the psychoanalytical viewpoint as well as psychological and moral. There's been confusion with the terms "sin" and, for example, "guilt." Consequently, the fact that man, as an individual, is a sinner has very little meaning or importance. But what has become much more important is the role that man plays in society.

There's a novel written by a pastor which has a lot to say about this subject. It's about the wife of an industry boss who was a generous woman—very

charitable and helpful. During a worker's strike at the factory, the boss's wife was constantly mistreated. The author points out that workers were absolutely justified in their actions. The woman's good qualities carried no meaning; what was more significant was her role as the boss's wife. That attitude is very characteristic of the French thought and mindset.

RH: *This is true also in the U.S. Who the person is socially is more important than who the person is as an individual.*

How should the Christian stress being a Christian? You have mentioned a number of things—the idea of being concerned with new situations, putting yourself into that and getting to know people. Would you have just one suggestion for the Christian to be a Christian in the way in which he or she lives?

JE: It's difficult to single out one suggestion when we're speaking in general terms. But what always comes back to me as being absolutely essential is hope. By that I mean be able to com-

municate to and convince those around us in the midst of very tangible circumstances that there is always a hope that remains. I believe this is a very practical concept because we are in a crisis situation and we're going to have an increasing number of people who live in anguish and despair, fearing tomorrow. This should be lived out in the professional setting as well as our other interaction. It's not a question of simply talking about and relating, but rather a question of how we live.

RH: *When you refer to this crisis, are you referring to any particular kind of problem?*

JE: Yes, I mean the general state of crisis in our society as seen in the economy, unemployment, etc. I think that, in spite of its apparent successes, the U.S. too will experience this crisis. And I think that it's a situation that's going to last a long time. So it's necessary that Christians be the means and have the strength to help others as in times of war to, in figurative terms, "cross the desert" and get through the crisis.

Today in the newspaper *Le Monde* there was a long article stating that the French are becoming very pessimistic. They're totally convinced that things are going to get worse rather than better. I believe the Christian must be the person who says not that things are necessarily going to get better, but rather that when things are going badly, there is, nonetheless, a hope and a reason for living.

RH: *Is there some particular opinion that you would like to share in terms of what you feel is important for Christians in America to know other than what we have talked about?*

JE: Yes, I believe that this is not limited to American Christians. We need to realize again the tremendous responsibility that we have. All Christians are held accountable, but even more the Christian in the United States because of the vital role that your country plays in the world situation. American Christians make up a part of this world power and they share part of the responsibility, that this power and influence be used to affect in a positive way the world's living situation. A vital part of this responsibility involves American Christians having a better understanding of the rest of the world than the American politicians and policy-makers. It's odd for a European to observe the misunderstanding and contradictions created by American politicians concerning world affairs. †



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