

# Mirror of These Ten Years

Only through complete refusal to compromise with the forms and forces of our society can we recover the hope of human freedom.

JACQUES ELLUL

† IN THE FIRST PLACE, we must admit that it is difficult for a Christian to talk about himself. Not that it is difficult to lay oneself bare (especially in these days of literary exhibitionism). But a Christian ought to know how little interest attaches to him as a person. And he ought to know that it is better to talk about Jesus Christ than about himself. If nevertheless he is led to talk about himself — as I have been here — he must do so not only with strict honesty but above all objectively, in detachment, examining himself without romanticism, as a different object; always aware of the promptings of old human nature and always remembering the warning, “Do not be conformed to this world.”

A second preliminary remark, as banal as the first. Obviously, my thinking has developed under two influences. On the one hand, I kept to the same path as before, sharpening and widening my ideas and in general pursuing the native bent of my mind. On the other hand, my thinking changed under the impact of external events, of sociological, political, ideological permutations. This kind of thing influences me the more because I always think “at grips,” as it were, with my surroundings — sometimes in protest against what is happening but always taking account of it. I make no claim to being a philosopher or a dogmatician. I can never look at anything *sub specie aeternitatis*. Whatever I think, do, write as a Christian, I think, do, write it in relation to a specific setting. I shall not say that I am mentally “committed”\* (to a particular line or school of thought, for instance), but I am “involved.”

Well then, two processes have worked to change my mind. If the first was intrinsic, a matter of

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\*Translator's note: Ellul says, literally: “I shall not say that my thought is ‘engaged’ . . .,” and explains in a footnote: “I reject the idea of being ‘engaged,’ for two reasons. One arises from circumstance: in France, this word has taken on clearly political connotations. The other arises from principle: to be ‘engaged’ is to give a gage, a pledge; and for my part I refuse to pledge my mind to anything or anyone, save Jesus Christ.”

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development and creation, the second was above all a matter of crises and renewed questioning. So it is mainly the second that I shall speak of. Let me say only a few words about the first.

## I

In these ten years I have come to a progressively clearer view of my writings and of the principles underlying them. From the beginning my thinking revolved chiefly around the contradiction between the evolution of the modern world and the biblical content of the Revelation. Step by step I had arrived at two convictions, both negative: on the one hand, that it was impossible to construct a comprehensive “Christian system” applicable to man’s political, economic and similar activities. Of course, from the intellectual point of view it is possible to construct such a system, but it would be totally inapplicable, therefore totally meaningless: it would foster the illusory *belief* that “we have the remedy but nobody will buy it.” Moreover, those who attempt to work out a Christian political system usually do not look beyond the society they live in, thus in effect conferring on that society a Christian blessing; and this is inadmissible.

The other negative conviction I have reached is this: that Christianity does not offer (and is not made to offer!) a *solution* for social, political, economic problems (or even for moral or spiritual problems!). God in Jesus Christ puts questions to us —

questions about ourselves, our politics, our economy — and does not supply the answers; it is the Christian himself who must make answer. Consequently, I have set up the principle of confrontation. We must seek the deepest possible sociological understanding of the world we live in, apply the best methods, refrain from tampering with the results of our research on the ground that they are “spiritually” embarrassing, maintain complete clarity and complete realism — all in order to find out, as precisely as may be, where we are and what we are doing, and also what lines of action are open to us. The Christian intellectual is called frankly to face the sociopolitical reality.

This is one demand on the Christian intellectual. The other is that he also develop and deepen his knowledge in the biblical and theological fields. But he must beware of “inflecting” theology for the sake of the “cultural” (that is my objection to Tillich). The only thing that will be of any use is not synthesis or adaptation, but confrontation; that is, bringing face to face two factors that are contradictory and irreconcilable and at the same time inseparable. For it is only out of the *decision* he makes when he experiences this contradiction — never out of adherence to an integrated system — that the Christian will arrive at a practical position.

So I have steadily deepened this idea, which is meant to prompt every reader to make his own decision, on the spiritual as well as on the political or economic level. The writing I had undertaken in a tentative frame of mind assumed a progressively better structure. The whole of it is a composition in counterpoint. Every sociological analysis of mine is answered (not in the sense of replying, but in that of noting the other dialectical pole) by a biblical or theological analysis. For example, to my book *The Political Illusion*, a study of politics as actually practiced in a modern state, corresponds my *Politics of God, Politics of Man*, a biblical study of the Second Book of Kings. To my book on technology corresponds my theologically based study of the great city as the supreme achievement of man’s technology. Etc. But the system and the conclusions to be drawn therefrom will appear only at the end of my work, if God permits me to arrive at the end.

To sum up: in these past ten years I have deepened and clarified my ideas and above all I have applied them more completely.

## II

But most fundamental for me in these ten years was a certain crisis in my thinking that produced important results (important for me!) and arose from many circumstances. I shall describe it under four heads: (1) the Algerian war, (2) my relation to the World Council of Churches, (3) my relation to the Reformed Church of France, and (4) the theology of the secular and of the death of God.

The Algerian War. Since 1934 I had belonged to a small group that sought to put the Algerian problem before the French public. We had failed completely. When the rebellion started, I wrote several articles calling on the church to intervene in order that a federalistic solution might be negotiated with the Algerian leaders or a system of

## How My Mind Has Changed

FIFTH ARTICLE IN A SERIES

“double nationality” instituted. I had stated publicly that, in my opinion, this Algerian business could not be settled by military means, except those employed in Madagascar in 1947: drowning the revolt in blood, and without delay. But early in 1956 I came to the conclusion that it was now too late for negotiation of any kind, and that the only possible long-run outcome of this war was France’s defeat. I did not think it right to support the National Liberation Front, because its victory would necessarily result in the impoverishment of the French *colons*, in a dictatorship, and in far-reaching retrogression in every department of Algerian life. In fact I did not see that there was anything I could say or do, because it was already too late to reach a just solution.

It was then I parted company with the majority of French Christian intellectuals. These Christians began to be concerned about the Algerian problem in 1956 — passionately so, especially in 1957-58. Almost without exception they sided with the N.L.F., and they raised protests against the French army’s use of torture (of course they said nothing about the N.L.F.’s use of torture). I refused to sign petitions, to take part in demonstrations, to vote on synodal motions. Besides, it seemed to me that petitions and so on were of little importance. I found myself very much alone and under severe criticism on the part of those who supported the “good cause.”

All this led me to think more carefully about the role of the Christian intellectual. His role, it seems to me, is essentially that of a sentinel (Ezekiel chapter 33) who foresees approaching events and gives warning before the situation reaches the pitch of tragedy, takes on a massive character or becomes the focus of passions. There can be no just solution save when the political situation is still fluid, not too acute and as yet unpublicized. Once passions are unleashed, no just solution is possible. I believe that the Christian is able to perceive things that others do not yet consider important. His role is to discern the problem at its birth, and never to howl with the wolves when it has attained enormous, dramatic proportions. *Then* the Christian must be silent,

must pray and repent for all. This view and this conviction were born in me out of the experience of the Algerian affair.

The World Council of Churches. A second factor that has greatly influenced my thinking is my estrangement from the World Council of Churches. Through experience, I had reached the conviction that the council was on the way to becoming a bureaucratic system, an enormous machine that, the larger it grew, the more it conformed to sociological laws of organization, rather than obeying the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Sadly ironic, I said that Protestantism was doing just about what the Roman church (by developing the Curia) had been doing since the 16th century. I found myself more and more at odds with the W.C.C.'s way of laying hold of and looking at problems. That did not mean that I questioned the importance of the ecumenical movement and of the desire for unity. I simply realized more and more that the old theological differences had less and less sense and that it was only because their theological formulas had become obsolete that the various churches were ready to meet together. But at the same time it seemed to me that a new line of cleavage was appearing: the political line. The true differences within each church were of a political nature and might lead to schisms. The World Council precipitately adopted positions that seemed to me scarcely worth taking seriously: problems poorly analyzed, inadequate solutions, superficiality, lack of sound theological thinking, etc. I have a horror of the reign of false experts!

The crisis came into the open at the Conference on Church and Society (1966). There I voiced my total dissent, because it seemed to me that the conference had not tackled any of the basic problems of our society, had simply affirmed purely demagogic theses (for example, those about the so-called underdeveloped countries), had proposed remedies some of which were in fact inapplicable, and had adopted a theology of revolution without taking theological thought at all.<sup>1</sup> So in this respect too I found myself on the fringe of the movement that the generality of Christians were engaged in. And this naturally led to a number of changes in my thinking as well as in my activities.

The Reformed Church of France. The third factor in my change of mind was the Reformed Church of France. I am a member of the council that governs that whole church. In 1957-58 I believed that the church could take resolute steps toward "reform." First, it seemed to me that in a time of rapid social change the church also needed to modify its forms of

organization and its relation to society, and to revise its ideas of evangelization, ministry, etc. To this end we set up a ten-member "Commission of Strategy," which did a notable piece of work in elaborating a complete plan for revising the church's structure and forms of expression in the light of the changes in society. But after six years of work our efforts ended in failure — in spite of the fact that we had taken every possible tactical precaution lest we offend custom. We had worked out a plan by which reforms were to be introduced gradually, and we thought that each successive step would be acceptable to the faithful. We were wrong. Some of our reforms were accepted, others so changed as to make them worthless, still others rejected outright. Well, our plan was of a piece; so it must be said that we failed. We came up against a ponderous apparatus (even though we were part of the governing organization), against tradition, against the indifference and apathy of the church's members.

Second, it seemed to me that the church had to deal with the problem of hermeneutics, for several views on the interpretation of Scripture were developing within it. The "new hermeneutics" is not uniform — J. M. Robinson's differs from Ebeling's. Now, the Reformed Church of France was already pluralistic: liberals, Calvinists, Barthians coexisted within it. The new hermeneutics was a threat that forced us to ask how far Scripture could be "demythologized" and reinterpreted and what would be left of the kerygma. We set up a commission representing six points of view to study these questions seriously and to arrive at a confrontation. But, one after another, representatives of the various viewpoints stopped coming to the meetings, until only the three "Barthians" remained.

These two failures so deeply influenced my thinking that I was led to conclude that the church, as church, was incapable of reforming itself, and that dialogue and communication were as difficult in the church as elsewhere — if not more difficult. Hence arose certain theological reflections. For if the Holy Spirit is present in the church, the church ought always to be reforming itself; and the Spirit will establish communication and true understanding in the faithful. So I asked myself whether God, who sometimes turns away, had actually abandoned our church. A question, not an affirmation.

### III

The New Theology. Finally, I come to the fourth factor that changed my mind; namely, the "new theology" — the theologies of Tillich and Bultmann (which to be sure were old but up to then had been relatively unknown in France) as well as the theologies of the secular and the death of God. It is not these new formulations themselves that I consider difficult or disconcerting. Moreover, any number of arguments can be marshaled to refute these

<sup>1</sup>I want to emphasize that I am not hostile to the theology of revolution. In my *The Presence of the Kingdom* I gave an entire chapter to considering Christianity as a revolutionary force. But I do insist on rigorous theological analysis.

theologies on the intellectual plane. But necessarily they introduce suspicion — and I think we must distinguish carefully between suspicion and the spirit of criticism. The latter is altogether desirable. Every believer ought always to be examining the content of his faith, ought willingly to undergo this test; because it is only the faith that is “unprotected” by some intellectual or sociological reinforcement that is true faith in God in Jesus Christ. Historical criticism, for instance, seems to me entirely a wholesome procedure.

But here we come up against something quite different. This “new theology” is an attack on the content of the faith — an attack not with honestly intellectual weapons but with the appearance of rationality and scientific rigor, thus an attack that is a spiritual aggression. This is exactly what the philosophy of Feuerbach does — and indeed all these theologies implicitly go back to Feuerbach. For when you face a system that attributes everything to the cultural (the God the Bible *speaks* of is only a cultural expression) and to linguistic structures (the message has no true content; it only has syntactic structure), your intellectual refutation of it cannot be couched in terms more exact than those adduced in support of the system. The quarrel cannot be settled on that level; and when it has been fought a question necessarily remains: that of a kind of evidence that is beyond philosophy. In other words, we can no longer read the Bible in simplicity of heart, because this theology begets suspicion; we can no longer pray with utter trust in God, because this theology sends us back to our own human nature. So it is a crisis of faith that is joined here. There was a period when Barthianism bade fair to land us in arid dogmatism. Now we are in a period of “dilution,” of watering down the expression as well as the content of the Revelation. I personally find myself caught in this crisis, facing it honestly and knowing that God is faithful and will not abandon us even when human folly becomes frenetic.

#### IV

These various crises have led me, first, to withdraw more and more from politics and from action in the church; second, to become much more radical in all my thinking.

I am convinced that any action we can take, whether in politics or in attempts at church reform, is utterly useless. As to politics, I am now confirmed in the skepticism that came over me after my political experience (as deputy mayor of Bordeaux) in 1944-48. Any action open to us is necessarily small-scale, concerned with details. Which is to say that it will inevitably be nullified by the body society. Ours is a global society which cannot be changed piecemeal. Any attempt to deal with one small part of the sociopolitical problem is bound to be taken over by this society and turned to its advantage. The same

goes for the church (at least for the church I know): where a thousand steps need to be taken, the mass of the faithful will consent to take only one. Moreover, the general view is that the church needs merely to *adapt* itself to society and modern thought — whereas it is just the opposite that must be attempted: so to structure the church that it can live and speak as an *unassimilated foreign body* in our society. But that is an idea that, so far as I can see, is impossible to realize today, an idea too high for the generality of the faithful.

So I turned away from actions of that kind. That does not mean that I fell prey to resignation or pessimism. (My pessimism is theologically based, and it was already a radical pessimism; but along with it I experience the absolute joy of the redemption and the resurrection!) I simply gave up certain points of view that I considered marginal. I face the crisis — including the theological crisis — for what it is, in the assurance that on the other side of such crises the truth of the gospel is at last proclaimed in truth. I bear the burden of this crisis so far as I can. But then I am led to an even more radical position — to a political radicalism and to a theological radicalism. These words, however, must be understood in a sense different from their usual one! By political radicalism I certainly do not mean a leftist or pacifist position. I venture to say that demonstrations *contra* the Vietnam war or *pro* Maoism are an absolute anachronism, totally unimportant and without any bearing whatever on the things that are basic in our society. We must get to the roots of our society (technology, political power, psychological manipulation) and attack it there. In a way I admire the hippie movement, but I do not believe that such a movement can result in any worthwhile development or action. The hippies, whether they like it or not, are merely a luxury phenomenon in a “great society.” The technological society and the power it commands form the infrastructure without which the hippies could not exist. The radicalism I am in search of is much more basic. But I do not know whether it can be formulated nor whether it will require some particular mode of action. In any case, I believe that it is only through complete refusal to compromise with the forms and forces of our society that we can find the right orientation and recover the hope of human freedom.

As to theological radicalism, by that I certainly do not mean any of the theologies mentioned above (death-of-God, revolutionary, secular, cultural, new hermeneutical). In my opinion the radical fault of these theologies is their conformity to the world; that is, to this society. It is because our culture and our science have acquired such prestige, because our technology witnesses to the greatness of man, etc., that this theological movement has developed. In the name of science and of human power, this movement is radical so far as the old dogmas, creeds,

etc., are concerned. But this is a radicalism that characterizes the whole society, and what is so wonderful about falling in with it? On the other hand, so far as the world and modern society are concerned, these new theologies are conformist in a truly radical (!) way.

The mark of the theological radicalism I have in mind is precisely its refusal to compromise with these theologies, which look (but only look) sound and are the expression of the spirit of the times. But we certainly cannot go *back* to the old, faulty and

obsolete formulations; that would serve no purpose, and besides it probably could not be done. It is *beyond* the crisis that we must find the true expression of the Revelation. Not an expression that is acceptable, adaptive, conformed to the modern spirit, but an expression that is true because, on the one hand, it comes to grips with the problems of our society and its people, and, on the other, firmly upholds the *reality* of the Revelation in its fullness.

Today my thinking centers on the search for a Credo for the church of tomorrow.

## Tilting with the System

An interview with Cesar Chavez, leader of the grape pickers' strike in Delano, California, and of the nationwide boycott of table grapes.

BOB FITCH

FITCH: The first question I'd like to ask is "Why boycott?"

CHAVEZ: You know, when you consider everything, we don't have any options. Most of the other things that would have been options depended entirely on the good will of the government and we know enough to know that they're not going to move. Especially, they're not going to move in a conflict situation like ours. Personally, the big reason was this: I thought the American public would respond affirmatively.

F: That's optimistic. Most of the predictions now about the American public are not optimistic.

C: They're not optimistic because they're clichés now — "the country's sick," and all those things. Really, we haven't tried to understand how institutions work. The common procedure is to insult your friends and to feel that they ought to drop everything they are doing and come in and help you. Theoretically that would be great. But if you're going to organize, and if you're going to be a realist, you know how much to expect and you're not going to be disappointed. You plan accordingly, along very realistic lines.

F: What's the realistic basis for optimism about a public response to the boycott?

C: Well, first of all, I contend that not only the American public but people in general throughout the world will respond to a cause that involves injustice. It's just natural to want to be with the underdog. In a boxing match, however popular the champion may be, if he begins

to really get the other guy and beat him up bad, there is a natural tendency to go with the underdog. And in this struggle it's not a contest between two people or a team but a contest between a lot of people who are poor and others who are wealthy.

F: What happened to the other options? Such as legislation?

C: When you get into legislation you're playing with a borrowed bat. Once you get into legislation then it's the whole question of compromise. The only reason growers are seeking legislation now, after 35 years, is because they are under pressure. They want to use legislation to take away that new-found right the workers have found through the boycott.

F: What do you mean?

C: Legislation that's being proposed permits unions but takes the boycott right away from the workers, and doesn't permit them to strike during harvest time. Of course that's the only time we work. The proposal comes not out of a spirit of giving the workers civil rights, but as a gimmick to further restrict their rights.

F: Why can't you stop the importing of Mexican labor?

C: It's a long history of the government and the employers working together. Not the same program but different variations. In fact, it's part of the system. Even under the most liberal administrations we wouldn't get them to enforce border controls. The immigration service and the border patrol always worked on the assumption that it is not really illegal for these people to be here provided they are working, are being use-

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