

5. The Triumph of Grace in Ellul's Confessional Theology: January 18-21

I must say more about Ellul's confessional theology which sustains his entire philosophy of life and pervades all his writings. I am interested because Ellul comes from a Calvinist background in the French Reformed Church. He traces his religious development over the years in the first chapter of his *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on his Life and Work* (English translation published in 1981). While his mother, a Protestant, was deeply pious, his father, "a highly intelligent and cultured man," was a complete "Voltairean," (2) and steered his son towards a similar outlook on religion, so much so that Ellul that does not hesitate to say that in the years of his childhood and early youth his religious formation was nil. The young Jacques should have received a conventional middle-class upbringing, but his father, who was ethnically Serbian and Italian (and, in fact, on his Serbian side of upper class lineage), never succeeded as an immigrant in France, reduced as he was with his family to poverty, and remaining an outsider in French society until his death in 1942. Poverty acted as a strong stimulus to Ellul's interest in Marx, socialism and communism, and he became and remained all his life a knowledgeable and insightful commentator on Marx, but was to become a fierce critic of totalitarian Marxist-Leninism and doctrinaire socialism.

After completing his *lycée* education, Ellul went on to the study of law and eventually successfully completed his doctoral studies. However, in 1940 he was dismissed from his teaching position at the University of Clermont-Ferrand in Vichy France; his father being a "foreigner" and his own questioning attitude made this pretty well inevitable; he also was not helped by the fact that his wife was of British nationality and Dutch birth. He was forced, therefore, to return to his home city, Bordeaux. His father was arrested there by the Germans and was to die in prison. Ellul and his family moved into the countryside, in a very isolated area, and until the liberation of France in the summer of 1944 supported themselves by farming; Ellul himself became active in the *maquis*, the local resistance.

After the liberation, Ellul saw a promise of radical political and social reform based on a "federative and cooperative approach." However, he soon found that these would be blocked on both the right (Gaullist) and left (socialist and communist) sides of the political spectrum. He became therefore disillusioned with politics and returned to teaching; acutely and wisely aware of the dangers inherent in any utopian ideology, he opted for a purely provisional understanding of what politics could achieve. Already in the '30's he had begun to engage with Christian faith and theology, especially the theology of Karl Barth, and in the years to follow he developed what I like to call a

distinctly confessional (rather than a systematic) theology which became the driving force behind his numerous writings critiquing contemporary society. In Ellul's already mentioned short work, *Perspectives on Our Age*, this theology is set out in a nutshell in the 27 pages of the fourth and final chapter, "Faith or Religion." It is developed in much greater detail in the third and final part, "World without End," of his *What I Believe*, the English translation of which was published in 1989. For the remainder of this essay, I will be drawing upon this.

The spirit of Karl Barth (1886-1968), often called the greatest Protestant theologian of the 20th century, pervades "World without End," although he is mentioned only in passing. In the wake of the trauma of the First World War which shattered the hitherto widely prevalent confidence in civilization's march of progress, Barth reacted against the liberal theology which had left its stamp on much of Protestantism in the course of the 19th century. God was viewed as the projection of humankind's highest ethical aspirations, and Jesus was seen as the great teacher who embodied these. Barth's theology is often characterized as neo-orthodox in that he went back to the canonical Hebrew and Greek scriptures in order to recover God's authentic revelation of himself. He was certainly not a fundamentalist subscribing to biblical inerrancy, but for him Scripture was and must be the supreme authority; without it God would be absolutely unknowable to man, although in his later writings; he came to acknowledge that there were glimmers of the truth about God in religions other than Christianity.

Barth came from a Swiss Reformed (i.e. Calvinist) background, but his was a far from a traditional Calvinism. Most conspicuously, he rejected the doctrines of double predestination and limited atonement, namely that God's wills from eternity that some will be adopted into life everlasting with God and others will be rejected and "damned" to everlasting separation from God, which is what hell essentially is. For him, God's Grace, i.e. God's embracing of humanity in his love is universal in scope and is uniquely manifested in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, his Son, the human-incarnate God. This is also at the core of Ellul's faith, thus placing himself in the company not only of Barth but also of a few early church fathers, most notably Origen. He does not proclaim it as an absolute dogma, but as a supremely well-placed hope.

Ellul goes to great lengths to defend to defend his conviction that salvation is universal: God draws all of humanity and all persons, past, present, and to come, into his Kingdom. He goes to great lengths to demonstrate with numerous citations from the Bible, especially from the New Testament, the Greek Scriptures, that this is indeed God's promise. Texts such as John 3.16 ("God so loved the world that he gave his only-begotten Son that whosoever believed in him should not perish but have life

everlasting”) that seem to indicate that salvation, eternal life, and the Kingdom of God, will come only to those who believe in the Son of God are explained by him in such a way that universalism is not excluded. I very much share his conviction, but I do not think that, in the final analysis, the question can be settled by appeals to specific Bible texts alone. All I would say myself in this context and for this purpose is that Jesus himself, in his words as recorded by Mark, Matthew, and Luke, the respective authors of the three synoptic Gospels, which bring us closest to his authentic sayings, says nothing that points to a doctrine of eternal damnation for the unbelievers. Even the parable of the callous rich man who, upon death, passes to punishment in Hades (Luke 6.19-31) says nothing of the sort. In fact, what Jesus intimates here is a belief, whether literal or figurative, in Purgatory such as was eventually elaborated in the Catholic tradition; I have always been struck by the fact that the man is in sight of and in communication with Heaven.

For me, it was a profound experience of existential crisis that made me see that recognizing the universality of eternal life for all human beings is the right answer. It came two days after my former life-partner Scott took his own life. During these first two days, after the tears which came when I learned the news of his death, I was emotionally numb. Then the tears started to flow again, more bitterly now, but very soon, amidst those tears, I became convinced that God had taken Scott to himself, and I spoke aloud the words, addressed to Scott, that testified to that conviction. Scott had been a wounded soul since his late teens when he suffered a serious nervous breakdown from which he never fully recovered and the lasting effects of which were never completely alleviated by the medication he had to take from then on. He had also become alienated from the Catholic Church and agnosticism and atheism had become his ideological refuge. Still, underneath his hardnosed cynicism there was always a heartfelt sensitivity to injustice and suffering. I began to see this much more clearly after I, having lived with him for almost nineteen years but at last unable to put up anymore with his volatile moods, broke up with him in January 1995. Thanks be to God, for both of us more than fourteen years of reconciliation and friendship still remained; I will always be immensely grateful for this.

A few years before his death Scott sent me a telling brief e-mail saying he had no longer any quarrel with the Church. He never explained why. Had he experienced, perhaps, an instance of true kindness from the Church? If so, it was not enough to stop him from taking his own life. Decades earlier he had already told me that he would do so if ever life were to become unbearable for him, and because of what in his final years he felt keenly was a declining health and mobility, the latter most of all, in July 2009 at the age of 57 he had reached that point. Scott's death has been the great tragedy in my life, but, paradoxically, with it also came the greatest turn imaginable of spiritual

deliverance, which once and for all it resolved for me the question of eternal life for all of humanity. In this, I am able to rejoice in the triumph of God's Grace. There are no limits on what God can do in his love.

The relentless negativity of Ellul's critique of the contemporary world is, fortunately, more than offset by his optimism regarding humankind's ultimate destiny in the Kingdom of God. How exactly that Kingdom will come about he does not presume to know; to his great credit, he stays well clear of the wild-eyed apocalypics indulged in by many fundamentalists. He even allows that the best fruits of human civilization, of science and technology for instance, will have their place in that Kingdom; our good works will indeed follow us.