

Q. Who is to Christian Sociology what Barth is to Christian Theology?

A. Jacques Ellul.

Q. How do you know?

A. Jacques Ellul says so. On page 211, speaking of the Death of God theologians, he says: '... they claim to continue the theological criticism of religion such as Barth had carried out, or also the sociological scouring which I had undertaken. We often heard it said that "Barth stopped half way," or in connection with me, "There are areas which have escaped Ellul's sociological critique.'" Well of course, I have no proof that people *aren't* frequently lamenting Ellul's prophetic negligence, so I'll take his word for it.

But if in fact Ellul is little read or heeded, that might go to show that the prophetic mantle which he wears is genuine. He certainly gives us an uncompromising critique of certain trends in Christian and peri-Christian thinking which it will not harm us to heed.

If I give a very brief account of what I take to be his thesis, it is not intended as a criticism of the book's length: he is thorough rather than prolix. The thesis might be expressed as follows: we are obviously in a post-Christendom era. (Note, post-Christendom: 'post-Christian' would not, I think, make sense to Ellul.) The social process which leads from Christendom to post-Christendom is laicisation, which at its best means that the state does not promote any religion but is 'simply ... a political, administrative and economic manager'; and religious and sectarian interests are not allowed to determine the nature of society; but muddled Christian thinkers, notably Harvey Cox and the World Council of Churches, will insist that what's going on is secularization, and that a creature (ideal construct or sociological reality?) is emerging called Secular Man, which is what the gospel is all about, deep down. The weakness which Ellul finds in secularization theology is that it fails to note the recurrence of the Sacred, of myth and of religion precisely in the world which thinks it has got rid of those things. Indeed the very instruments of desacralization and demythologizing—technology and

history for instance—become the new objects of veneration or of mythical thinking; science, as the school essay title has it, is a sacred cow. As for religion, there's more of it around than ever, and Ellul has some fun at the expense of Harvey Cox who, in the 'Feast of Fools', seems to rejoice as much at the re-appearance of religion as he did, in 'The Secular City', at its disappearance.

Central to Ellul's position is the dictum that Christian faith is *not* religion. He sees as a 'specifically medieval heresy' the making of 'a connection between sentiment, human religious aspiration, and faith, between the institutions of religion and Christianity ...'; whereas, 'throughout the entire Bible, it would appear, rather, that there is a radical break.' (pp 155-6). In other words, there is a classic Barthian theological grounding to his thought. But this does not mean that he has nothing to say of the world as it is, though the title of his last chapter, 'Coda for Christians', may lead one to think he thinks only Christians can hear his positive suggestions. Those suggestions are briefly made: under the explosive and iconoclastic impetus of the Word, Christians will see to it 'that technical objects are never anything but objects reduced to utility, measured with a cold eye, and scorned for their always base usage.... that science is one possible representation among others of the world in which we live, and never is the key to truth.' And they will stand up to all the 'gods of the stadium, of speed, of consumer goods, of utility, of money, of efficiency, of knowledge, of delirium, of sex, of folly (*folly?*), of revolution, of agnostic learning, of politics, of ideologies, of psychoanalysis, of class, of race, gods of the world calling for unheard-of holocausts.' Well, I suppose the prophet can be allowed the odd rhetorical splurge.

I would have ultimately, to disagree with Ellul's pessimism about the possible relationship between the secular process and the kingdom of God, because I believe in sacramentality in a way which a Barthian would not. But my own position will be none the worse for scrutiny by the searching mind of Barth's sociological sidekick.

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