

# **Jacques Ellul and Michael Bauman on Jesus and Marx**

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# Contents

|   |    |
|---|----|
| An Extract from the book <i>Jesus and Marx</i> by Ellul | 3  |
| A Critique by Michael Bauman                            | 5  |
| Ellul's Response  | 8  |
| Bauman's Response to the Response                       | 11 |

# An Extract from the book *Jesus and Marx* by Ellul

Perhaps it seems odd to attempt a reconciliation of anarchism and Christianity, since the idea that they are utterly irreconcilable enemies is so well established. Doesn't anarchism repeatedly cry "no God and no Master"? ... Looking at the question from the opposite angle, we see that Christianity clearly not only respects authority, but presupposes that authorities exist. Everyone believes Christianity to be a doctrine of order... From both sides, then, the reconciliation of anarchism and Christianity seems excluded... Without a doubt the official Church, transformed into a power, taught the opposite of biblical teaching... Essentially... both the Old and New Testaments take exception to all political power. No power can claim to be legitimate in itself. Political power and organization are necessities in society but only necessities. They attempt repeatedly to take God's place, since magistrates and kings invariably consider themselves the incarnation of authority. We must continually challenge, deny and object to this power. It becomes acceptable only when it remains on a humble level, when it is weak, serves the good \_ and genuinely transforms itself into a servant...

Usually, however, this principle is stated the other way: the state is legitimate except when it becomes tyrannical, unjust, violent, etc. In reality, since the state is illegitimate, it should be destroyed, except when it acts as servant of all..., effectively protecting the good...

The only Christian political position consistent with revelation is the negation of power: the radical, total refusal of its existence, a fundamental questioning of it, no matter what form it may take. I repeat this statement not so Christians will turn toward some sort of spiritualism, political ignorance, or apolitical position - certainly not! On the contrary, as Christians we must participate in the political world and the world of action, but in order to deny them, to oppose them by our conscious, well-founded refusal. Only this refusal can challenge and occasionally impede the unlimited growth of power. Thus Christians can take their place only beside anarchists; they can never join the Marxists, for whom the state is unacceptable only to the extent that it is bourgeois.

Do Christians contribute anything specific or special to anarchism? ... Anarchists live in an illusion, believing that it is possible actually to abolish power and all its sources... Today we can no longer believe in one of the absolute tenets of anarchist faith: the inevitability of progress... We must not become discouraged, then, if our anarchist declaration fails to lead to an anarchist society... [However] when we shake

the edifice, we produce a crack, a gap in the structure, in which a human being can briefly find his freedom, which is always threatened... I can hear the disillusioned anarchist: "Is that all we are doing?" Yes: *all* that; through our refusal, we keep the trap from closing all the way, for today. We can still breathe out in the open. The Christian must enable the anarchist to make the transition from a contemptuous "Is that all?" to an "All that," filled with hope...

I believe this two-edge Christian contribution of realism and hope to be essential for anarchism. Anarchism's need for Christianity shows the possibility of a practical harmony, which could accompany the dear agreement of the two on the theoretical level. This possibility contrasts with the fundamental contradiction of Christianity and Marxism, and the extraordinary uselessness of cooperation between them. I must clarify, however, that in this essay I am not trying to find a new concordism. I do not mean to imply that anarchist thought expresses the Christian political orientation, nor that Christians should adopt an anarchist orientation. In other words, we must not fall into the same error with anarchism that has been made with respect to Marxism!

I have tried to show, contrary to what is usually believed, (1) that no radical contradiction exists between anarchism and the concrete consequences of Christian faith in the sociopolitical area, whereas there is a contradiction between Marxism and the implications of the faith; (2) that anarchism does not imply as Marxism does, the elimination of Christian specificity; (3) finally, that within the context of modern society and our concrete historical situation, the determining and decisive problem is that of the universal power of the state<sup>TM</sup>. Communism has shown itself incapable of responding to this challenge. On the contrary, each time it comes to power, it merely reinforces the state. Refusing a synthesis of Christianity and Marxism does not amount to "preaching submission"... On the contrary it means entering a *different* revolutionary way, another way of questioning that is infinitely more radical and profound.

# A Critique by Michael Bauman

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The first task of an academic author is to understand his subject. The second is to make himself understood. Though it may be offensive to say so in a forum like this, I do not believe that in Jesus and Marx Jacques Ellul has succeeded well on either count. Because it often takes longer to correct an error than to make it, and because this book contains a surprisingly large number of errors of fact and errors of interpretation, I must content myself, within the small scope afforded a book review, to mention but a few of the most flagrant or most easily noted shortcomings.

First, I deny that Christians ought to feel any pangs of guilt "because of what the searching gaze of socialism revealed about them, their church, or even Christianity itself (p.5). Socialism, for one thing, says nothing about anything. Only socialists do. What they say, I am convinced, is philosophically sloppy and historically incorrect. The guilt revealed by "socialism" should be guilt felt by socialists. I can not countenance Ellul's irresponsible assertions that Marxist criticisms are "obviously based on justice" or that "in every respect our society is unjust for both individuals and groups" (p. 6, emphasis added). Nor will I countenance Ellul's unproven (and unprovable) assumption that justice means equality. One must not say, with Ellul and the Communists that our "unjust society results from twenty centuries of Christianity" or that "neither churches nor Christians are doing anything to improve the situation (p.6). All I will admit is that books and ideas like Ellul's will not work and that his last statement is a refutation of his own book, written as it is by a Christian and clearly intended as an aid.

What is one to make of the scandalous assertion that "no matter what kind of poverty the poor suffer, the Communists are on their side, and the Communists alone are with them" (p. 6)? I can only say "God help those with whom the Communists stand." Obvious examples like Mother Teresa aside, one need only look at the years since WWII to see that Communism is the major perpetrator of poverty and not its solution. The Japanese, for instance, were on the losing side of the war effort and suffered nuclear destruction twice. They occupy a land not great in size or in natural resources. Nevertheless, their economy and their standard of living far outstrip that of the Soviet Union, which was on the winning side of the war, which was given all of Eastern Europe as a gift, and which has more people, more land and more natural resources than Japan. A similar comparison could be made between North and South Korea, East and West German, and mainland China and Hong Kong. Capitalism, not socialism, has unlocked the secrets of wealth and sustained growth. Capitalism, not

socialism, has been the better friend of the poor. Socialists, not capitalists, ought to feel the pangs of guilt revealed by Socialism. Poverty circles around socialist ideas and socialist ideologues wherever they come to power. Shocking as it is to some, by the 1980's the average Black's per capita annual income under apartheid in South Africa was higher than that of the average white under Communism in the Soviet Union. In short, while capitalism and the Church are not perfect, neither are they what Ellul describes. Nor is Socialism.

Despite Ellul's groundless claim that communist tactics are consistent with communist goals, it is obvious that communists preach liberation and practice enslavement. As long as the same band of happy thugs continues to occupy the Kremlin and to sustain the Gulag, we must not say, as Ellul does that "they accomplish what Christianity preaches but fails to practice" (p. 6). Such ideas are scandalous and reprehensible. Have we forgotten Solzhenitsyn so soon?

That is why Ellul must not say, as he does say with regard to Fernando Belo's communism, that he respects the choice of others to be Communists and does not question it (p. 86). Nor should one say, with Ellul, that Belo's leftist revolutionism is a "perfectly respectable" choice. It is not. But, Ellul's muddled sense of Christianity and of Communism permits him to make these and other such abhorrent assertions, such as that Belo's view of the "radical opposition between God and Money, God and the State" and "God and Caesar" are not only true, but "truly evangelical" (p. 89). In other words, because of his partial acceptance of Communist claims, one can tax Ellul with the same charge with which he taxes Belo: he "appears not to suspect [that] Marx's thought is a whole - a precise, integrated unit, based on a thorough method. Once one has adopted it, one cannot mix it with other methods and concepts." (p. 94).

Second, Ellul's understanding of history is less than reliable. For example, he tells us that "often an ideology springs up to parry an ideology-free practice" and that "capitalism is a practice with no explicitly formulated ideology; socialist ideology arises to oppose it. Afterward, capitalism will produce a 'defense'" (p. 1). Not only is it a highly debatable (if not downright mistaken) notion that there is any such thing as an "ideology-free practice" or that capitalism, when it emerged, was one, it is patently false to claim that its ideology developed in response to Socialism. Karl Marx and *Das Kapital*, after all, come after Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations*, not before.

Such errors seem to arise from Ellul's peculiar view of ideology, a view wherein he tries to separate the inseparable. Contrary to Ellul, one cannot readily distinguish theology from ideology because the former category is a subset of the latter. To distinguish theology from ideology is no 'more useful than to distinguish Irishmen from humanity. One might well distinguish good theology from bad ideology, or good theology from bad, but one need not do what Ellul tries to do. His attempt is based upon a definition of "ideology" so fully idiosyncratic that if one looked only at his definition, one could not guess the word it was intended to define. Flying in the face of every dictionary known to me in any language, Ellul defines ideology as "the popularized sentimental degeneration of a political doctrine or worldview; it involves a mixture of passions

and rather incoherent intellectual elements, always related to present realities: (p.1). A large number of Ellul's conclusions are based upon this monstrous and unjustifiable definition. When the foundation is tilted, how can the superstructure stand straight?

Ellul argues that while Christianity is not an ideology, it can degenerate into one as when, for example, it becomes "a means for distinguishing those who are right from those who are wrong [the saved and the damned" (p.2)]. But, Christianity did not become a means for making such determinations; that is something it was from the very beginning. Ellul, one begins to think, does not understand the nature of the very religion he is attempting to promote and to protect. "Christianity," he says, "is the destruction of all religions" and of airbeliefs" (p.2). Because Christianity is, on any common sense view, undeniably a religion and entails beliefs, one cannot but wonder after reading such statements (1) if Christianity is not an enemy to itself, or (2) if Ellul uses language with grotesque imprecision and license. For many, the second option recommends itself most convincingly. So also does the conclusion that imprecise language is inescapably tied to muddled thinking.

This book's muddle is extensive. Ellul's skewed vision of history and of economic principles and reality are sometimes shocking, as when he tells us that Caesar is the creator of money (p. 168). For over 200 years, since Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson, economists have known that money antedates government and that it arises from human action, not human design. Government recognizes the medium of human exchange and adapts itself to it. Government does not create money. But such ideas are (so far as this book is concerned) unknown to Ellul. He nowhere shows a knowledge or understanding of classical or of Austrian economics. If his index is to be trusted, Hayek, Von Mises, Schumpeter, Ricardo, Hume, Smith, Say, Bastiat, Gilder and Sowell form no part of Ellul's knowledge of economics. I dare say that without knowing them, one could not understand Marx. Perhaps that is why Ellul believes that Marx was "admirably well acquainted" with the problems of his day, that Marx's misdirected and ineffective theories can be labeled "solutions," and that his anti-theism was not an essential part of his ideology (pp. 4,153).

And what is one to make of the grossly exaggerated assertions that "both the Old and New Testaments take exception to all political power" and that "the state's prosperity always implies the death of innocents" (pp. 171,172, emphases added)?

In short, I believe Ellul misunderstands history, economics, Communism and even Christianity itself. In this book, Ellul does not adjudicate the Christian tradition, Christian wisdom, or Christian revelation in a capable or well-informed way.

# Ellul's Response

My work has been so often criticized without being understood that I believed nothing could shock me. However, I must confess that Mr. Bauman's article [Issue #2, Nov. 88] first provoked irritation, then stupefaction, and finally I thought it to be a joke! Indeed, I found it (and I use Mr. Bauman's terms), "monstruous", "grotesque." I never read such accumulated stupidity and lack of comprehension. It is evident that Mr. Bauman knows nothing of my work. He does not know that I was for forty years professor of history of institutions and economics and that I am aware of the works of Hayek, Schumpeter and others. Mr. Bauman knows nothing of Marx's theory and of the prominent Marxist theoreticians. Setting aside his ignorance, I am equally disturbed that an obtuse theology professor can so violently judge a book that he has clearly misunderstood and I doubt even seriously, read.

Mr. Bauman's atrocious misconceptions include the following:

1. He accused me of saying that Christians ought to have a feeling of culpability because of what socialism revealed. But, I never said that! I said, in fact, "Many have had a bad conscience"... I report a fact, nowhere have I said that Christians must have a bad conscience.
2. I never wrote that justice was equality. I have often written to the contrary. Mr. Bauman should begin to apply to himself the rule that he set in the first line of the article - "The first task of an academic author is to understand his subject."
3. He accuses me of saying that Communists are on the side of the poor. Here again, he missed it. I don't justify the Communists, I do not say that they help the poor. I say that wherever the poor revolt, Communists are there. If Mr. Bauman had known the Leninist prods, if he had read Lenin's work, he would have known that that is their tactic. Clearly, I do not entertain the simplistic idea that Communists help the poor; they use them in order to come to power. Only for appearance and public opinion sake do Communists care for the poor.
4. His inability to understand is further revealed when he believes that I could have said that our unjust society is the result of twenty centuries of Christianity. I wrote clearly that this is the accusation hurled at Christianity by Communists and that if many ceased to be Christians it is because this argument was accepted.
5. Concerning my statement that the Communist tactics exactly correspond to Communism's objective, Mr. Bauman, again understood nothing since he doesn't



know the clever tactics and grand strategy of Lenin. In a stupid fashion, he transforms it: "the Communist discourse is contrary to what Communists practice." But discourse is not the same thing as tactics!

6. Mr. Bauman attacks me because I said that Belo's choice is respectable. For myself, a priori, I respect the choices of all, but I didn't say that I accepted them. If Mr. Bauman knew something about the matter, he would have known that I wrote one of my books in order to prove that Belo's position is wrong, not in conformity to the Gospel. Moreover Belo clearly is ignorant of Marxist doctrine.
7. Mr. Bauman makes numerous misinterpretations like this one: He attacks me violently because I wrote that "Caesar is the creator of money". From his learned ignorance, he said that money existed before the State (I wrote twenty pages on the origins of money in my six volumes! History of the Institutions). But I never wrote what Mr. Bauman thinks to have read! I wrote that Caesar makes [i.e. coins] money (fait les prices de monnaie). Mr. Bauman ignores the difference between create [i.e., originate) and make [Le., coin]. Besides, very early, as soon as metal ingots were used as money they were indeed marked and usually it was the political power who did it.
8. I could go on enumerating the stupidities and confusions of this article, but I will insist only upon two very important questions. First, it is "evident" for Mr. Bauman that Christianity is a religion. I was thinking that since Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, the distinction and even the opposition between religion (which is a fabrication of man in order to satisfy his religious need) and the Revelation of the God of Abraham and Jesus (which doesn't not correspond to the religious desire of man), was clear and well accepted (at least by 90% of European theologians). Evidently, our theology professor knows nothing of Kierkegaard or Barth! From a sociological standpoint, he assimilates Revelation to religion!

My second point concerns my definition of ideology. The "excellent" Mr. Bauman finds it scandalous and unjustifiable. This entails three remarks. First, he seems to ignore that there exist at least fifty definitions of the ideology. Every author has his own and the one of Adorno is not Belo's or Aron's, or Lukak's, etc.. I proposed a definition after having said that there were many others. My definition corresponds to the one accepted by most French political scholars. I counsel Mr. Bauman to read, for example, the different articles of the Encyclopaedia Universalis concerning ideologies, where he will learn that the matter is not so simplistic as he thinks. What is apparent from his article is his inability to distinguish among Theory, Doctrine and Ideology! For example, he argues that I am mistaken in saying that often an ideology arose to defend a previous praxis devoid of ideology. (He doesn't know, for instance, that Capitalism was constituted since the XVI century, without the help of any ideology). I am

supposed to be mistaken in saying that the liberal ideology appeared to defend Capitalism against the Socialist ideology. What an error he is uttering! Of course, Smith's *The Wealth of the Nations* was published long before Marx's *Das Kapital* - Bauman's response is absurd because, here, we speak about doctrine. Liberal doctrine appeared before Socialist theory. Socialist ideology, however, appeared since 1815 in order to attack Capitalist structure. This was before any Liberal ideology existed.

9. He accused me of not having cited, in this debate Hayek, Schumpeter, Herme, Say, Bastiat, etc... But I don't understand why I should mention these in a debate about Marxism and Christianity in which they are not relevant. I have not quoted the prominent Marxist classics, either. I wanted to focus on current debate and I quoted only current authors, (with the exception of Proudhon and Bakunin).
10. Finally I maintain:
  - a) that although it raised the level of life of populations and produced much more from an economic standpoint, liberal capitalism created a much poorer proletariat than before;
  - b) that our affluent nations create an increasing poverty in the third world;
  - c) that nineteenth century Christianity played the role of an ideology of justification for the wrongs of Capitalism;
  - d) But that Marxism will not resolve any of these problems and that Christians must not ally themselves with the Communists.

This was evident in my book. In short, Mr. Bauman understood nothing I had to say. I pity his theology students if he misunderstands the Biblical text in the same fashion. His misunderstanding reflects a theology of the last century, the preconceived ideas of the Constantinian heresy, and a desiccated social conservatism.

# Bauman's Response to the Response

Regarding Professor Ellul's objections to my review (My numbers correspond to his.):

1. Ellul is wrong. I did not accuse him of saying that Christians ought to feel guilty about what Marxist critics allege concerning Christianity or Christians. As a politically conservative, free-market Christian, I denied that we Christians ought to feel Socialist-inspired guilt because the Socialist criticisms directed at us are radically flawed. I said so as a preface both to my complaints about what Ellul does say and to some of the criticism Socialists have made with which he agrees.
2. While rehearsing the Communist critique, of Christian practice, Ellul occasionally (and, I think, rightly) registers his dissent, as, for example, he does when he notes the manipulative way Communists side with the poor. He does not do so, however, when addressing the issue of justice. The communist critique writes Ellul, "was obviously based on justice. In every respect our society is unjust for both individuals and groups. It produces inequality on all levels: inequality of opportunity, income, power, culture" (p. 6). Quite clearly, these words indicate that inequality is an injustice and (conversely) that justice entails equality, things Ellul says he never wrote.
3. I did not "accuse" Ellul of saying that Communists are on the side of the poor I quoted him. Further, contrary to Ellul's assertion that he does not say that Communists help the poor, he himself writes that "they accomplish what Christianity preaches but fails to practice" (emphasis added, p. 6).
4. Ellul objects that the accusation that our "unjust society is the result of twenty centuries of Christianity" is one concerning which he "wrote clearly that this is the accusation hurled at Christianity by Communists and that if many ceased to be Christians it is because this argument was accepted." He most certainly did not. In the passage in question (pp. 5-6), Ellul is speaking about why many have become Marxist Christians. He nowhere mentions either the possibility or the actuality of their ceasing to be Christians, for this reason or for any other. (Nor does he pause here to distance himself from this Marxist challenge.)

5. Despite Ellul's opposite assertion, I am well aware of "the clever tactics and grand strategy of Lenin." Unlike Ellul, however, I do not believe that Lenin's means are compatible with Lenin's goals or could ever lead to them. I hold the same view of all Communist regimes. Five-year plans, Gulags, iron curtains, military expansionism, cultural revolutions, perestroika, glasnost, and state-sponsored terrorism cannot and will not yield a worker's paradise, a proletariat without chains, or a world without the state. I contended and do contend, that a radical incompatibility exists between Communist ends and means. Barbarism will not yield humanitarian or therapeutic results.

Further, contrary to Ellul, discourse and its uses most certainly are a part of Communist tactics. That is Lenin.

6. Not all, perhaps not even most, of the choices humans make are respectable or are worthy of a Christian's respect. Some choices are ignorant and inadequately informed; some are counter productive; some are wicked. Despite his intention, Belo's choice to be a Communist is all these things. I do not respect it anymore than I respect someone's choice to be a slave trader which I consider to be very much the same thing. I challenge such choices and I excoriate them. Contrary to Ellul, while I respect and value choosing, I do not value all human choices, especially this one. I cannot side with someone who writes that Belo's choice to be a Communist "clearly merits our respect," that it is "a political choice," one "which we do not question!" (p. 86).
7. If the distinction between "make" and "create" is so fundamental to Ellul's view of the nature and origin of money (a distinction that in economics I contend is truly insignificant), and if I am mistaken to use the word "create" concerning Caesar's role in this activity, then perhaps Ellul should enlighten his translator to that fact, for Ellul's text does say - despite his insistence that he "never wrote what Mr. Bauman thinks to have read!" - that "Jesus means that Caesar, as creator of this money, is its master" (emphasis his, p. 167).
8. You may still number me among those who consider Christianity a religion and who deny that "biblical revelation necessarily entails iconoclasm, that is, the destruction of all religions [and] beliefs" (emphasis added, p. 2). From my position on this issue, however, one should not deduce, as does Ellul, that I "know nothing of Kierkegaard or Barth"! One could more accurately deduce that I reject them and that I have reasons for doing so.

In addition, I contend that not all the working definitions that scholars advance (much less all definitions) are acceptable. Some, for example, are unjustifiable question-begging and need to be discarded. Some debates are won (and lost) by definition. As a trained literary critic, one who opposes the unnecessary proliferation of definitions and the degeneration of language that results, I did, and

do, reject Ellul's idiosyncratic use of the term "ideology." to do so is not, as Ellul charges, "simplistic."

As a trained historian, I equally as firmly reject his reconstruction of the rise or capitalism and its subsequent development, besiegement, and defense. Some of my reasons for doing so are outlined in EA. Hayek's *Capitalism and the Historians* (1954).

9. By mentioning the economists I did, I was intentionally endorsing their relevance to what Ellul calls "the current debate" between Marxism and Christianity, especially Gilder, Smith, and Bastiat. That Smith and Bastiat are not our contemporaries is quite insignificant. Current debates can often be resolved (or at least set in their proper light) by invoking the wisdom of the past. Insight was not born with our generation. I only regret now that I did not mention Whittaker Chambers in this context, a man who is not an economist, but whose views are wonderfully pertinent.
10. a: That liberal capitalism did not further impoverish the poor, I refer you to such books as Michael Novak's *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (1982), pp. 16-22.  
b: That the wealthy do not prosper at the expense of the poor, I refer you to such books as George Gilder's *Wealth and Poverty* (1981) and his *The Spirit of Enterprise* (1984), especially the former. Both books also demonstrate that Christian values are capitalist values.  
c: Nineteenth-century Christianity was not a monolithic entity about which we can make generalizations like Ellul's, which alleges that it served merely to justify the failures of capitalist societies and systems. The evangelical united front in America, for example, served to ameliorate - not defend - such shortcomings.  
d: We agree!

Finally, Ellul need not worry about my students or my biblical exegesis. The failings of his own anarchist reading of Scripture, however, I will expose elsewhere. I shall do the same regarding what I consider his unjustifiably incomplete break from Marxist taxonomy and methodology, and from the ideology that necessarily attaches to them.

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