

As we approach the end of the 20th century there can be little doubt that the world has changed more dramatically in the last hundred years than in any previous century. If we are looking for Christian guides as we reflect on what has happened and its significance, the French sociologist, personalist thinker, and lay theologian, Jacques Ellul should be near the top of any list.

Ellul came to prominence when, after catching the eye of Aldous Huxley, his work on technique (originally published in French in 1954) was translated into English as *The Technological Society* (1964). A classic text, it argues that man's new devotion to technical efficiency in all fields is the hallmark of our century. Until his death in 1994 Ellul produced numerous biblical and ethical studies and further perceptive analyses of technology, propaganda, politics, and the general state of Western civilization until his death in 1994.

This new book (the first translation of Ellul since *Anarchy and Christianity* in 1991) provides a most helpful introduction to his thought for those unfamiliar with it and much fascinating new material for any who have already benefitted from his writings. Marva Dawn, author of a doctoral thesis on Ellul's concept of the principalities and powers, has selected and translated eight journal articles by Ellul. All but two of these originally appeared in the Barthian French Reformed journal *Foi et Vie* (which Ellul edited between 1969 and 1985) and most were written in the 1940s and 1950s. In addition to translating and adding explanatory notes, Dawn helpfully tops and tails each article with short pieces providing biographical information and showing how these early ideas were developed by Ellul in his later books.

Four of the eight articles are more explicitly theological and address what he terms "Christian pessimism", the meaning of freedom in St Paul (the origins of his later *Ethics of Freedom*), the significance of the Reformation, and questions of hermeneutics. A fifth, entitled "Christian Faith and Social Reality" offers an excellent account of his view of the

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relationship between the theological and sociological strands of his corpus and of his conception of the Christian's role and responsibility in society.

It is however the first three and earliest articles which are the most significant. Published in 1946 and 1947 (during which time Ellul, after his involvement in the Resistance, briefly served as Bordeaux's Deputy Mayor) they originally appeared as a series entitled "Problems of Civilization". Here we see the seeds of his later thinking: the importance of a biblical understanding of the powers (long before Berkhof, Yoder and Wink made this theme popular), his critical appropriation (in "Needed: A New Karl Marx") of Marx's method in order to develop his own distinctive social analysis of the forces shaping society, and his growing disillusionment with standard political solutions to modern society's problems ("Political Realism"). As our century closes, these pieces remain stimulating reading and stand as a prophetic challenge to the whole direction which Ellul perceptively saw the western world taking in the immediate post-war years.