

Author's Preface

As a preface to this re-edition, about which I am very pleased, I would like to recall briefly the circumstances in which this book was written.

Before the war of 1939–45, European Christians were divided into two primary tendencies. For some, the only things that counted were witnessing, evangelism, theology, Bible study, and piety. And most of these, including the Barthians,¹ believed that if God does everything, then we need not be concerned with the world's history. The other group believed on the contrary that it was essential to intervene in the concrete, practical, and essentially political world. (A very small number in France, around André Philip, pursued a Christian socialism.²) For this group, the one great problem raised was that of the state in general (and in this, they were good followers of Karl Barth!). What were the powers, functions, and limits of the state? It is true that at this time people were coming up against the establishment of great dictatorships, and the question that seemed urgent and perhaps unprecedented was to know precisely what position to take in the face of this dictatorial state. Was it always necessary, for instance, to obey Romans 13:1 and following (which, regardless of the political issue, always seemed to be “the text” that was absolutely clear and provided the sole orientation for Christian conduct)?

But in my own case, the conditions of my early life, my encounter with the thought of Karl Marx, and then my studies in law, economics, and history, all drove me to refuse both of these positions.³ The first, because it seemed to me to fit the criticisms of unbelievers: religion serves only

1. Followers of the theology of Karl Barth (1886–1968).
2. André Philip (1920–70), Protestant socialist politician.
3. Karl Marx (1818–83), theorist of revolutionary socialism.

as an escape from the world. As for the second, I certainly did not have enough biblical knowledge to critique it, but it seemed to me impossible to defend. I was already forming the very sharp distinction between the powers, the authorities (still very personalized, very incarnated in a person) and the modern, completely abstract state. In addition, the state was *one* of the elements that made up this complex world, and I saw with a certain impatience that Christians either left things to happen on their own or else were mistaken about the problem. I had been part of two movements, one Catholic (*Esprit*) and the other Protestant (*Ordre Nouveau*), in which others shared my same concerns, but none of this carried over into [broader] Christian settings.⁴ It was during this time that some friends and I studied the new facts of the large city, mechanization, and then technique, administration⁵ (which would later become bureaucracy!), and so on . . .

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When the war came, Protestants' choices and matters for thought seemed very clear and simple, at least in France. (The situation was more difficult for Catholics, because Marshal Pétain was a great Catholic who privileged the Catholic Church, and the "values" that he proposed for France's motto, "Work, Family, Homeland," corresponded well to Catholic values.⁶) For us, it was *clear* that Hitlerism had to be opposed, that it was no longer enough to hold [only] a theologian's or devout layperson's position toward it, and that we needed to engage in the fight (and as a result, "do politics"). So this was the terrible adventure that led so many French Protestants to take politics seriously. I was always convinced that this was not enough, but there was an "order of urgency"—we first had to overcome Nazism and fascism. After that . . . we would see!

But at the Liberation,⁷ I found my friends divided again into two groups. On the one side were those for whom the important thing was to return to theology and building up the church. On the other were those who had a passion for politics and no longer thought about anything else

4. *Esprit* (Spirit) and *Ordre nouveau* (New Order) were associations and periodicals of the personalist movement. See note 8, p. 95.

5. That is, the overall work of government through its departments and services.

6. Philippe Pétain (1856–1951), head of the French Vichy government under the Nazi occupation of 1940–44.

7. The end of the Nazi occupation of France in 1944.

(even in their pastoral ministry). But it was a very specific sort of politics that concerned them. In the Resistance,⁸ they had met and become friends with many communists, and from that point on they viewed politics only from this perspective. I believe that their fixation on communism happened all the more easily in fact because, before the war, they had not had any political experience or even any political ideas.

So then in 1945, I realized that I had to write a short and simple little book about the presence of the Christian in the world of today. Not in the world in general, but in the world as it was, by trying to broaden the political view, enable the complexity of problems to be felt, and take new social phenomena into account. Christians and the church could not hold themselves aloof from the history of human beings, but neither could they become assimilated into one of the political currents (which too often had been the case throughout the church's history). Nor could they succumb to the temptation of wanting to elaborate a Christian society, a Christian state, a Christian politics. These were the three impossibilities that I found myself facing and that required a new investigation.

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I carried out this investigation with groups of non-conformist students⁹ that I brought together and with whom I went on camping trips. But the thinking was still only fragmentary, usually based on what met their concerns. When the Ecumenical Institute at Bossey¹⁰ asked me in 1946 to give four talks on "the Christian in modern society," I was given the opportunity to attempt a synthesis. I had to take a side implicitly in the theological opposition between Barth and Emil Brunner¹¹ (who had a great influence at that time), and also in relation to Barth's position in favor of a political expression of socialism.¹² (At this time Barth had entirely lost his sharpness of judgment, mostly due to the influence of his friend Fritz Lieb, a great admirer of the USSR and supporter of communism.)

8. The collective name for efforts to defeat or undermine the Nazi occupation. Ellul participated in the Resistance.

9. Student groups in the 1930s, affiliated with the personalist movement.

10. A study center near Geneva, run by the World Council of Churches.

11. Emil Brunner (1889–1966), theologian.

12. Ellul's typescript reads: *en faveur du socialisme comme expression politique du socialisme* (in favor of socialism as a political expression of socialism).

My four talks resulted in lively discussions. I felt even more strongly that I ought to press ahead with my analysis of society along with a rigorous biblical understanding that would not make concessions to various possible methods of interpretation. I began writing up these four talks and divided them into two parts. I have said elsewhere that many years previously I established the very broad plan for a work that would consist in studying the modern world and the Christian requirement in parallel. When I was writing this book, I had the impression that this was the direction that I needed to work in, and that this book could be the introduction to the whole. An incident confirmed this: my friends' pastor, J. Gastambide,¹³ said to me one day, "This is very interesting, but you often limit yourself to asserting things; you don't demonstrate them. For example, what you say about technique is new, but you need to develop it to give proof." It was after this remark that I began to work on my book about technique, and "that's how it all began."

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But I still needed a key to serve as a guide or compass and also as an intellectual instrument! As I hesitated among several themes and approaches, I was struck by the verse of Paul: "Do not be conformed to the present age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern the will of God, what is good, gives him pleasure, and is well done" (Rom 12:2). There were in this text three imperatives for me that I had to try to follow from that point on, and that I had to find ways of approaching that fit the situation today.

"Do not be conformed to the present age." There are two possible conformities. The first is voluntary adherence (and for this, it was enough to understand political programs, economic plans, and doctrines). But what drew me more, and what seemed to me to fit the level of Paul's thinking, was unconscious, involuntary adherence—which is so evident in this present age that we don't even think about it: these unspoken rules, taboos, and unquestioned truths that form a group's unconscious and subconscious. The "present age" is filled with evidence of this. But I completely rejected

13. Jean Gastambide (1906–88), a pastor in the Reformed Church of France and a signer of the Pomeyrol Theses, a Christian statement against Nazi collaborationism and antisemitism similar to the Barmen Declaration.

the interpretation by which this “present age” (*aiōn*¹⁴) is a kind of metaphysical reality, opposed to the coming kingdom, and always the same in itself. This present age was neither the particular one that Paul inhabited, nor a mysterious entity that was always the same; to me, each generation needed to recognize that it concerns its *own* age. So I needed to devote myself to discerning the foundations, structures, and components of the present “age,” . . . that is, the twentieth century. To do this, it would be necessary to understand the most important facts and also to interpret them accurately. But the “scientific” method of the “social sciences” (including mathematical treatment) seemed inadequate to me. I preferred a method closer to that of Marx, and especially, Weber.¹⁵ This is how I chose the questions that I addressed in this book.

Then, once we understand what this age is made of, we must, as Paul says, “not be conformed,” that is, not “take on the form” of this age. This is how I understood it: We must not follow everyone’s opinion, not *adapt* ourselves to the powers of this age, not follow the “conformisms,” be they political, philosophical, or ideological, nor the trends—even when these ideologies and trends *seemed* to conform to the gospel (for example, favoring the poor, decolonization, etc.). In general, such “similarities” arose from a lack of understanding about our society or a highly superficial interpretation of the biblical message. Some Christians believed they were Good Samaritans by helping the poor (but they did not see the specific details of poverty today), or they believed they were being like Jesus by becoming involved in violent movements, but they were and are still wrong about revolution. So I had to begin by understanding the structures of our society that determined the conformisms. I had to critique them, starting from the gospel, and become engaged in a movement in which I would necessarily be alone, because it would be based in faith in a revelation that others did not share. In order to change the world, beginning with changing our “form,” we were alone. But if all Christians understood this, the world would actually be transformed through the action of the Holy Spirit.

What I have just described (“Do not be conformed”) could not be based in a particular understanding or specialized knowledge. It was the “renewing of your mind,” meaning that the starting point lies above the

14. A Greek word meaning *era* or *age*. Paul uses this word throughout his New Testament writings in reference to the world’s path apart from Christ. In 2 Cor 4:4, Paul says that Satan is the ruler of the *aiōn*.

15. Max Weber (1864–1920), sociologist.

action that I just described. It requires a change in our understanding about things, people, and situations (which is more than a change in method!), meaning that everything must be brought into the light of Jesus Christ. This involves a *clarity* that the best observers never attain, and which was actually that of the prophets, and *a new way of understanding*. For me, this renewing of the mind corresponded, then, to the commandment to love God with . . . all one's mind. It seemed to me that it did not mean: Do theology and become a pastor! To love God with one's mind meant putting one's thinking in the service of God's action in the world, through the medium of the believer.

And this service related as much to politics as to psychological action! What good news¹⁶ today for transforming minds as well as hearts, through which the world could be changed. And this change of the mind should ultimately correspond to what God desires for this world, be pleasing to God, and be *well done*. So, for example, a revolution for justice that caused millions of deaths could not be pleasing to God or "be well done." Multiplying communication in order to have nothing to say could not correspond to loving one's neighbor. (The theory of relations did not yet exist that would enable people to "love" not only those close to them but also those far away, which is a complete misunderstanding of *agapē*.¹⁷) New light would always need to be shed, corresponding to an understanding of the Bible in the "here and now." I asked myself, if we must take this decisive verse seriously, what then might be the Christian's position, or "side," in the world?

Such were the issues for which I posed the question of the Christian's presence in this world, a new world in comparison to what had existed before the war. This was the starting point for all that followed.

16. *Évangile*, gospel.

17. A Greek word meaning *love*, found extensively throughout the New Testament. It refers to love of the kind that God has for human beings and that they, through him, may have for him and for one another. See for example Matt 22:36–39, Rom 5:8, and 1 Cor 13.