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An Ethic of Contradictions

We should continually return to the process of becoming aware of the contradictions and paradoxes we encounter every time we try to intellectually formulate the content of the Christian faith. There is the contradiction and paradox of knowing that God causes retribution to fall on himself, and executes the condemnation that he pronounces by bearing it; the contradiction of an intemporal God who enters time; the imperturbable God who bears all the suffering of the world; the sovereign who is a servant, the immortal who dies on the Cross; the all-powerful who allows his creature to act without constraining it . . . There is no explanation, no satisfying solution for all of this—the contradiction of the two Natures of Son of God, truly God and truly man: the unexplainable, scandalous encounter in which each nature remains complete in its integrity, and yet both are united in one sole person. There is the paradox that God would satisfy his love with the salvation of guilty men, by executing his Justice through the condemnation of his innocent Son (but is this not a lack of love towards his Son, and thus a sovereign injustice?). There is the paradox that the Savior would proclaim that he has come to save sinners and not the just; or the contradiction in the fact that though justified through grace by means of faith, man nevertheless remains a sinner, that this pardon and this justification do not do away with sin, do not ultimately relegate it to the past, do not transform the very nature of man; there is the contradiction between the affirmation that the Lord has conquered the powers of the world, and yet this world is becoming more and more unrelenting, terrible, aggressive, as history progressively unfolds in opposition to the truth; the paradox that the Christian, bound to

his or her Savior, already has a deposit of eternal life, yet must continue to live in this world without trying to escape or separate him or herself from it, even though this world is radically sinful, wicked, rebellious and condemned, destined for annihilation—but the statement that "God so loved the world . . . " designates precisely this world.[1] In this series of contradictions and paradoxes, no explanation is satisfactory; there is no synthesis to be made between these contradictory elements; there is no unification of doctrine by any means (such as suppressing one of the two terms, or elevating one over the other, etc.); there is no solution. The term "dialectic" is only a way of saying that the fundamental structure of Christianity is contradictory in itself, and that we must keep the two terms opposed to one another. There is no intellectually satisfying solution, but we only need to know that *this* is how the truth is.[2] And that the contradiction and paradox are resolved by living it: for example, the contradiction of the two natures poses a problem for our intelligence—but the two natures contained in the man Jesus Christ were perfectly reconciled: he lived both natures together. And for those who knew this man, there was no visible contradiction. The same goes for all the oppositions we have highlighted: for example, the man who received his grace knows that he is still a sinner. He lives two different things simultaneously that are intellectually contradictory, but he lives them together. And this can be so because Christianity is essentially a matter of living; it is a doctrine only secondarily. Now, in the domain of ethics for Christians, we encounter precisely this lived element. This ethic is situated as a prolongation of these foundations that we have just indicated. It thus bears contradiction and paradox within itself, but they are resolved by the living man, in his life and not in his thought. The first obvious contradiction (which we have already come across) is situated at the level of the very constitution of this ethic, which must be both the expression of the will of God and an insertion into the concrete reality of the present world. Thus the formulation of this ethic depends on an unchanging, eternal word pronounced once and for all, valid for all men, that presents a demand of God without reservation or attenuation, that puts the Whole of man in play; and at the same time it depends on historical, social, economic circumstances,

1. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

2. These lines demonstrate Søren Kierkegaard's profound influence on Ellul. Against Hegel's intellectualist solution, the Danish thinker defended the idea of an inherently paradoxical Christianity whose internal tensions (between the finite and the infinite, the relative and the absolute, eternity and temporality, transcendence and incarnation) must be accepted, instead of seeking to reconciling the two terms in a harmonious synthesis. Cf. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript.*

on the context of civilization, on the social and psychological situation. It is thus a temporal, moving, relative science, which must take account of what is possible; now, this contradiction absolutely cannot be resolved. All systems of thought employed (e.g., those of the scholastics—commandments for everyone, then other commandments that only apply to saints, precepts and orders, rules and exceptions, etc.)[3] are lies. There can be no question of adapting the Word of God to circumstances, nor of sugarcoating it (for example, if Jesus Christ was so intransigent in the Sermon on the Mount, it is because he thought that the kingdom of God would be inaugurated immediately. But now that this situation continues . . . we must attenuate these commandments), nor of conciliation (for example, in pitting apparently contradictory biblical texts against one another: Jesus Christ says "Woe to the rich,"[4] and the Old Testament says "wealth is a blessing"). But neither can it entail a negation of the reality of the world where we live, in which we act as if this world did not exist. Living the totality of the Word of God to the letter while making an abstraction of society and history—this always leads to the rejection of the other (because they are part of the world), and by the same token, to the negation of the Christian life which has no meaning if it does not express love. We thus find ourselves in the presence of a truly insoluble and inevitable contradiction: purity and love. To want to intransigently maintain the purity of the commandment leads us to cut off relations with our neighbor; to want to express love leads us to participate in the impurity of our neighbor, and to bend the absolute nature of the commandment. (For example, in the Resistance during the Second World War: must we disobey the state to help Jews out of love? But God commands us to obey . . .[5] and should we lie? Or, to keep the meaning of the truth and to respect the authorities, ought we let the Jews be persecuted?) Now, the Ethic for Christians *must* be conceived in this contradiction between the present and the Eternal, between the Temporal and the absolute, between circumstances and the Revealed,[6] since it is a matter of living this revealed

3. Medieval theology distinguished "evangelical counsels" (the commandments of the Sermon on the Mount) that only applied to priests and monks, and "precepts" (the Decalogue and the Summary of the Law) that were imposed on laypersons as well. Martin Luther rose up to oppose this moral duality and abolished it in the regions that followed the Reformation.

4. Cf. Luke 6:24: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Cf. Job 42:10–15. In *Money and Power*, Ellul develops the argument that wealth represented a blessing in the Old Testament, but that Christ strips wealth of its character as a blessing, leaving only its character as a power. See especially pages 65–72.

5. Cf. Rom 13:1–7.

6. Cf. 74 note 2 on Kierkegaard's influence earlier in this chapter. Thinking Jesus Christ as a function of the dialectic between the temporal and the eternal is a central

and perfect word *in* this temporal body and the affairs of this present world. The formulation of the ethic will thus be necessarily contradictory in itself and by itself; it would be disobedience and a lie to claim to offer solutions. The role of the one who thinks about this ethic is certainly to make these contradictions stand out, but certainly not to give satisfactory solutions. Highlighting the contradictions will help the Christian to correctly pose the problem of his life and his conduct. But once he is given this information, he must discover what his response will be on his own, exercising his own responsibility. He cannot hide behind the authority of this or that Teacher to avoid the judgment of God. Incidentally, no *satisfactory* solution (i.e., one accounting for all conditions, and which is just before God) is possible. What good would it be, then, to formulate a plurality of lame responses? This would mean nothing. On the contrary, each one, establishing their own response, finds themselves both in the situation of the forgiven man making use of his freedom, and of the sinful man who must ask for forgiveness for this very decision that he has just made in all good faith, and with his faith. Ethics for Christians will thus have to make the contradictions appear, but will not offer prefabricated solutions.

One of the major contradictions is obviously the contradiction between the Christian life and the world, the totality of the powers that are hostile to God, rebellious and conquered. The Christian called to live in this world, called to use the things of the world, to participate in the projects of the world, in politics, in economic expansion, must always know that none of all this is legitimate, good, or right; and nevertheless, that they cannot just shake the dust off their feet[7] and be done with it; it is the universe of men, and it is loved by God for this reason; and that at the end of time, all this will be taken up by God.[8] To claim to live the Christian life outside of the world is false and illusory: Illusory, because whether we like it or not, we cannot avoid living in this world. The most reclusive monk still pays taxes, is still counted in the census, and submitted to police investigations . . . the most total Robinson Crusoe nevertheless cannot avoid buying this or that fabricated object, which links him into the chain of all the activity of the

element of Kierkegaard's thought. Cf. Marques Rollison, "God's Time: Kierkegaard, Qohelet, and Ellul's Reading of Ecclesiastes."

7. Cf. Matt 10:14, Mark 6:11, and Luke 9:5.

8. On God's taking up of all works and the ensemble of human history at the end of time, see Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*; *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation.* The extent of this assumption of human works is a question that changes over time in Ellul's works.

world. It is a false pretention. It is also a false situation from the perspective of faith: for if we are separated from the world, how could we bear witness to the love of God in this world by our life? Jesus Christ sends us into the world . . .[9] But there is still a complete contradiction between the Christian life and the world—at no moment can the Christian life accept what happens in the world as normal and just; at no moment can he say "this war is just, I will participate in it"[10]—nor that a given government is just, nor that a given distribution of goods is just. The Christian can never formulate this or grant his blessing, his justification to a project of the world; at no moment can he present a feasible project as the exact accomplishment of the demand of faith (constructing housing or feeding the poor, etc.). At best, it can only be a very minimal, secondary, and limited aspect of the Christian life. At no moment can the Christian believe that society organizes itself, is organized, or will organize itself in Christian truth—nor say that monarchy was the true Christian government, nor that communist society will enact Christian justice, etc.

But this should not lead to skepticism and abstentionism. As he cannot and should not escape the world, the Christian is effectively called to participate in the activities of the world. It is normal that he should exercise a profession, be a citizen, etc. But he must know that in so doing, he is participating in the activity of the world, and that he is not legitimate, just, or in agreement with God *ipso facto*. On the one hand, he must continually remind himself and others that all of this is extremely relative. Certainly, all political regimes are not indifferent; but while they may have a certain importance regarding this or that aspect of human happiness, they will never attain the justice willed by God. Yet it is not without interest to participate in these regimes, precisely to bear witness to love and the requirement of truth in these regimes. But this is on the condition that he does not let himself be taken in by this game, nor place more faith in politics than in his Lord to accomplish what is right (which happens very often). Additionally, he must recall that the best activities of the world are still sinful and subject to condemnation, that no profession is pure, no vocation perfectly corresponds to "Christian vocation." Of course, here again, this should not lead to

9. Cf. John 17:18 ("As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world"); 20:21 ("Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you").

10. For a critique of the notion of just war, cf. Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*, 5–9; "En toute liberté: violence et non-violence" (in this article Ellul qualifies Thomas Aquinas as a "humorist" for having defended the criteria of "lesser evil," while "Only God can make this judgement"); Ellul and Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology, and Christianity*, 38–39.

indifferentism; all professions are not equal—it is not the same thing to be a baker or a distiller, a doctor or a prostitute. But we must guard against passing a moral judgment on professions, knowing that the best profession is still a participation in the world of sin and evil. Let us take the doctor, for example. It is good and right for doctors to care and to heal. Let us suppose that through extreme vigilance, this Christian doctor manages to resist all the temptations of their profession; nevertheless, objectively, by helping the elderly live longer, they contribute to the aging of the population (which is a disaster in France); when they save those with mental problems who will have children, they contribute to the general decay of the race and the perpetuation of defects; when they eliminate infant mortality, they aggravate the tremendous population growth and set off dramatic processes, such as in Japan, Algeria, etc., for they must know that the development of economic resources cannot follow the same cadence, *under any political regime* (communism no more than capitalism). Of course, all this is not the fault of the doctor. But it is still the result of his actions, and he must know this to understand that the pure act of caring is inscribed in a sinful world and is not good in itself, but has its own negative repercussions. Once again, this does not mean that they should not care, but that they should accept this contradiction, should be conscious of the evil produced by the best possible acts that we can accomplish as a participant in this world; and consequently, that they should not feel just in exercising their profession, or because of their rights as a citizen, etc., that they should ask God for forgiveness for every undertaking in this world. The choices that we will have to make are thus relative, yet decisive (since it is here that our Christian life will be incarnated). They will never lead to a pure, good, or just effect; yet even in this, they are obedience to the love of God. This contradiction places us precisely in the presence of the problem of compromise. Because we live in this world, we cannot avoid compromise. All our acts are so submitted to the pressure of a given social context (as is our very being) that they cannot be the pure and simple translation of the will of God. We cannot act without getting our hands dirty (and all ethics is a problem of action). The one who wants to avoid dirtying their hands, who would keep themselves pure, will thus stop acting, will stop participating in the world. But in so doing, he disobeys God himself. The one who obeys the command of God and enters into the world necessarily dirties himself in this contact. All action will be established as a compromise between the will of God and the possibility of execution, a possibility that itself rests on a number of elements: the measure of faith of the one acting, the economic situation, etc. We must know that this is how it is. We must know that Elijah, in triumphing over the prophets of Baal through a miracle of the Lord, is then led to have them massacred, thus disobeying

the command of God to not kill; and the prophet of life thus has hands covered in blood. We must know that this is how it is, but we should not accept it. That is the whole difficulty. If, because we know that it is inevitable, we begin to find it acceptable, legitimate, and justified in faith, then all is lost. For what was the condition of fallen, sinful man becomes pride and a claim to justice. What was necessity that weighs on us despite all our efforts becomes an introduction of necessity *into* the Christian life, which is to say, into grace—from the moment that we begin to calculate the acceptable limits of compromise, when we begin to say that it is okay if our hands are dirty up to the wrist or the elbow, then all is lost. When we accept our dirty hands, this means that in fact we are dirty from head to toe, and that our heart is gangrenous. Compromise is inevitable, but it is always a defeat. It is never tolerable, acceptable. It is a grave heresy to consider that since compromise is of the order of finitude, of our Creaturely situation, it is thereby admissible. The fact that I should be limited in the duration of my life, in my capacity to understand or to will, in my physical strength, even in my love itself, is never a source of compromise. Compromise does not come from the limits of being, but from the presence of evil within the limits of being. This compromise is established between the will of God and the action of the Spirit on the one hand, and the corruption of the world and myself on the other. Every time a compromise is established, we must know that it is established in disobedience to God, that it is always a defeat of the Christian life. The same goes for history and the community as for individual life. The whole of Christendom is founded on an ensemble of compromises (regarding the State in particular). Thus it is a matter of resisting compromise to the most extreme limit. The Christian life, which is an act of freedom, presupposes the refusal of submission to necessity. Now, as we were saying, compromise is necessary—but every time there is compromise, there is obedience to necessities. We can thus ultimately say that compromise is the very negation of a Christian life. This life can never consist in measured and balanced doses of Holiness on the one hand and corruption on the other. The demand of the will of God is total and absolute. To say that God is a jealous God is to say that he does not accept precisely this sharing, this compromise; the same goes for the prohibition of walking two paths; the same goes for Jesus Christ's great proclamation that the one who violates the smallest commandment violates the whole law.[11] All this implies a will of God without reserve, without possibilities of adaptation or sugarcoating. When the Word calls us to Holiness, it is really a question of Holiness, not

11. Cf. Matt 5:19: "Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

some moral virtue. The Christian life must thus be unlimited and unattenuated obedience to the will of God, with a perfectly intransigent radicality. To allow compromise is thus the *complete* negation of the Christian life. Only we must have no illusions. We cannot think that we are in the kingdom of God; we should not take ourselves for angels. We must ultimately recognize our incapacity to live according to this Word. Everywhere and with utmost intransigence, with the most complete exigency, we must place ourselves in the reality of our situation; and here we come up against corruption and obstacles. We must not act "as if" this were not so. This would be an idealism, which would be fatal for the truth of the faith. To claim that this incarnation of the command of God is possible is childishness; *and thus*, it is also the negation of our finitude. Thus, every step of our life will be taken in the path of this contradiction, never arriving at a satisfactory situation, a solution; no situation is pure and good. But when we say this, when we set out knowing that we will be forced to expend ourselves to the very end of the fight, and end up in compromise, this must not diminish our energy, nor serve as a justification (since I cannot avoid compromise, I am thus right to accept it).[12] I cannot avoid it, but God does not tolerate it. This thus leads us to know that upholding the contradiction (which is the opposite of compromise) between the rigorous will of God and the radical evil in which we live is an indispensable element of the Christian life. It is a delicate and difficult situation, and we can understand that innumerable Christians seek to escape it. One of the modern trends in this evasion consists in minimizing the fall,[13] in cordoning off the influence of sin, in presenting the world not as the domain of the ruler of this world, but a place where it is possible for man to exercise his virtue. This attitude is at once a biblical error and a lack of realism. It is a new version of Christian idealism that periodically reinjects its venom into the church.

After having waged total war to see the accomplishment of God's will, both by oneself and around oneself, when we end up in compromise, we were saying above that this is a form of surrender: but this is the moment in which we must fall on our knees to ask God's forgiveness for our works. It is after the servant has done *everything* that he had to do that he must present himself before his Lord, saying, "I am a useless servant";[14] this cannot hap-

12. Here again we encounter Ellul's opposition to "making necessity into a virtue." On this subject, see 58 note 2 of the present volume.

13. In the first volume of *To Will & To Do*, Ellul critiques the tendency of Paul Ricoeur to minimize the reality and impact of the "fall": see the opening pages of volume 1, chapter 3.

14. Cf. Luke 17:10: "So you also, when you have done all that you were ordered to do, say, 'We are worthless slaves; we have done only what we ought to have done!'"

pen if he has not already done so. It is not by saying: "I am a useless servant, so it isn't worth the effort of exhausting myself; I will end up compromising, so it's not worth the trouble of fighting." We should thus fear the anger of God. But inversely, we must know that in falling on our knees, afterwards, by the grace of God, the compromise is broken and God reestablishes our work in its purity, by assuming it himself.

But we must still know that even in obeying the will of God, we are not unscathed by compromise. Let us take a simple example, with the State: when we say that the State must be secular (and likewise, when we say that ethics should be secular) this is surely correct in the biblical perspective. And yet when this lay State is established, this also means that it is a State that does not recognize the will of God, which is the great demonic temptation of the State. When we say that the Christian must obey the authorities of the State for reasons of conscience,[15] this is indisputably biblical, but it is not enough to eliminate compromise, since this Christian also necessarily obeys because of political conformism, out of fear for the police, out of ease. And even obedience purely for reasons of conscience, discerning the State as a means of God's action—does this not nevertheless, *also*, and *at the same time*, reinforce the Beast of the Apocalypse that the State is *as well*?[16] In other words, to the extent that it addresses an ambiguous structure of the world, pure obedience to the commandment of God (even when it is subjectively possible) becomes itself ambiguous in its expression. Because the State is the Beast of the Abyss and the agent of God on earth *at the same time*, obedience to the commandment becomes obedience to the one but also to the other. Likewise, exercising authentic charity towards the poor in modern society is obviously a form of the Christian life. But as the source of this misery today is collective, social, attenuating this misery out of love is to prevent this man from revolting against this unjust social order; it leads us to tolerate this social order. But in order to push him to revolt against injustice, should we refuse him the help of love? This would be a monstrous ignominy. This insoluble dilemma is the entire problem of funds for social aid, for example. In this we see that we cannot simply say that all is resolved in loving our neighbor. In fact, *in our society*, loving our neighbor leads to just as much compromise as all the rest.

15. Cf. Rom 13:5: "Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience."

16. On this identification of the State with the Beast of the Apocalypse, cf. Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, 92–99.