Late in 1981 I dug up one of Ellul’s early articles from the Protestant weekly Réforme: ‘La Femmes et les esprits’ (Women and the spirits) and found what we expect when we know Ellul: a maddening mixture of apparently reactionary views and revolutionary ideas. He maintained that, although a woman’s spiritual destiny resembles a man’s, her spiritual nature and her spiritual adventure differ from his.

On the other hand Ellul posited a kind of female superiority, in the sense that women have more direct contact with the spiritual powers (the Holy Spirit or rebellious powers) than men, so that they mediate between men and the powers, playing an autonomous role. Thus women call men’s vocation into question (Job’s wife, Delilah, etc.) and even their rule (Deborah).

On the other hand, a woman’s direct and spontaneous contact with the spirit world represents a certain danger, so that she needs her husband’s protection. He is her head and authority, symbolised by the veil of I Cor. 11. In reality, this authority represents the authority of Christ, who protects unmarried women directly. Ellul insists there is no male superiority here, just a different role.

Let me underline that these views tending to place women in an inferior position (in spite of Ellul’s disclaimers) are without exception revised in Les Combats de la liberté. I mention them here only in order to emphasize that very early on, he saw women as autonomous in some sense, and as having a quite different role to play than men.

Although, as we shall see, many feminists would find the role that Ellul suggests for women in his current view utterly sexist, he maintains their superiority. Indeed, as he said to me in 1981, he believes that women and women’s values hold out the only hope for our world.

Although some theologians have seen woman’s creation after man’s as evidence of female inferiority, Ellul maintains the opposite: each stage in creation is superior to the previous one, so that woman represents the high point of creation. She is the perfection of man, who was incomplete without her, and the source of his freedom in the sense that he finds freedom in relationship with her. The serpent attacks the woman because she is the head and perfection of creation, not because she is weaker than man.

According the Ellul, women’s superior values stem more from education and culture than from their genes, which probably play a role in shaping them but do not constitute a determining factor. Since women are excluded from politics, for example, they tend to form relationships based on values other than competition and force. Ellul explores this idea most extensively in The Subversion of Christianity, where he also offers his most detailed contrast of men and women’s values.

Sometimes he opposes these point by point so that the reader can grasp how he views them: men incline to eros the conqueror, rigid order, morality, power, rationality, pitilessness toward the weak, violence and quantitative values, whereas women favour agape the servant, flexibility, the faith-hope-love trilogy, nonpower, intuition, care for the weak and wounded, nonviolence, and qualitative values.

Vanderburg quotes Ellul as finding the masculine extreme ‘crystallized in technology,’ whereas the feminine focuses on sensitivity and spontaneity: ‘Women are now far more capable than men of restoring a meaning to the world we live in, of restoring goals for living and possibilities of surviving in the technological world.’

For this reasons, Ellul finds hope in contemporary women’s movements, unless they are politicized, in which case they have given in to masculine values.

Ellul emphasizes the importance of avoiding stereotypes in this discussion where they do often prevail. Men can also express ‘feminine values’ as exemplified in Jesus Christ, who displays them wonderfully.

Women as equals
As if to combat the view that women’s tendency to hold to non-male values makes them somehow second-class citizens, Ellul takes pains, especially in Les combats de la liberté, to show their equality with men.

Woman was created by God in his image just as man was, and therefore is just as representative of God as man. Ellul finds society’s failure to provide equal pay for equal work ‘monstrous,’ and finds it unacceptable that a woman’s adultery be punished more than a man’s.

Women’s rights should equal men’s, including their right to education. Ellul opposes phallocracy and machismo. In one of his newest books, he shows that in marriage, a man and a woman become part of each other, so that there should be no supremacy of either.

Women in society and the church
Just as woman is central in creation, her condition in society is so important that we can discern its quality by seeing how she is treated. Reducing women to slavery demonstrates that men have rejected God and the freedom he offers them. Women represent life, liberty and love, but men prefer violence, oppression and bloodshed.

Just as woman was freedom ‘in the beginning,’ so when the tables are turned, she becomes the slave. But in Christ, she must be the final place where freedom is rediscovered, and the one responsible for
the rediscovery of the values freedom expresses. Women should throw off their alienation, thus offering society the possibility of freedom. In the early church, women were not treated as inferiors, Ellul believes. Furthermore repression of women took place not because of Pauline or other biblical texts, but because Christianity became wealthy and powerful. At that point it naturally attempted to eliminate the threat women posed as those who represent values opposed to glory and success. Subsequently, biblical passages were used to justify this action.

In the midst of society’s gross immorality, the church found a scapegoat in women, whose place was lowered from the freedom they represented to the status of temptresses and inferiors, without freedom or the right to express themselves. The Virgin Mary was elevated both to provide men with a good conscience for what they had done, and to furnish an ‘ideal woman’ they could use to reproach women as they fell short.

Women in the Bible

In a detailed exegetical section of The Subversion of Christianity Ellul examines biblical passages often used to ‘keep women in their place’ (the creation and fall accounts, I Cor. 11 and 14, 1Tim. 2, etc), and finds that the texts in no way teach the inferiority of women. Rather, the Bible places women ‘in the center of God’s will for humanity’. Furthermore, far from teaching the inferiority of women in general, the Genesis account of the fall demonstrates men are incapable of ‘directing’ their wives.

Ellul finds the revelation of the resurrection to women first especially significant, since it fulfills the promise to Eve that her seed will crush the serpent, and shows Jesus’ high view of women: he entrusts the task of evangelism to them. Ellul emphasizes the degree of responsibility women had in the early church.

In general, Ellul explains ‘problem passages’ sociologically: in ancient cultures, women needed protection; subordination seemed ‘normal’ to the hierarchically minded ancients. Jewish repression of Second Century B.C. women represented a reaction to the moral decay of the time. Paul seeks to avoid the practices of cults, in which women presided over orgies; hair cutting, a cultural matter, should not be elevated to the status of a commandment. When men use the Bible to relegate women to an inferior status, they repeat the earlier error of preferring morality to revelation.

Inclusive language

Ellul recognizes sexist language as a weapon used to perpetuate male domination, and favors its elimination. Concretely, he decries the use of the generic term ‘man’ and the privileged status of masculine forms from which the feminine forms are derived. Unfortunately, Ellul himself continues to write as if such reform has never been thought of, but his practice is sometimes transformed in translations.

Although Ellul emphasizes women’s equality (as in Gal. 3:28), he insists their role should be different from men’s (in spite of the occasional suggestion that men must participate in housework). By trying to imitate men, women merely incorporate masculine ideology, showing they believe men to be superior. Female autonomy must take a different tack.

If this sounds like something feminists might subscribe to, the concrete suggestions Ellul makes are hardly designed to flatter: why are cooking and child-rearing so despised these days, he wonders? Work that produces salary is a curse in Ellul’s view, so why should women prefer it to work done only for love? By entering the workplace, women merely turn themselves into slaves, depending on an employer rather than their husbands for money.

Ellul goes so far as to say that the liberation of women ‘has already been achieved. It has led to a worse situation in which there is no Christian freedom nor any possibility of it’. Birth control, said to offer freedom to women, constitutes another blind alley, according to Ellul. The pill merely ‘frees’ women to behave like men, and substitutes ‘sociological determinism for biological determinism’. Although contraception provides a certain sexual freedom, it mainly increases autonomy, promiscuity and disease. On the other hand, women need to have children in order to find fulfilment and to influence society.

Transmitting and caring for life enable women to take their distance from the dominant ideology of their culture. Ellul accepts abortion under certain circumstances, but opposes its thoughtless generalization, maintaining that ‘the refusal of a woman is give birth is the negation of what is deepest in her.’ He realizes that he will be called ‘reactionary’ for such statements.

In a recent compendium of contributions to a colloquium on marriage, family and society, Ellul finds that we are presently acting out the philosophy of a century ago, when the family was taken for a secondary, superficial phenomenon. Today we know the importance of family relationships and the determinative influence of woman’s place in the family. We should do all we can to help society’s practice catch up with current theory, according to Ellul.

As he has done so often on other areas, Ellul manages to offend just about everyone when he talks about women. The evidence appears in responses to selections from The Subversion of Christianity in The Other Side (September, 1987). Doug Kittredge finds Ellul too feminist, since he appears to oppose the husband’s authority over the wife and to approve of similar roles for men and women in church and family. But well-known evangelical feminist Nancy Hardesty calls Ellul’s efforts ‘garbage’, since he writes ‘out of unexamined patriarchal assumptions’ and appears to believe men should be the ‘head’ of the family.

She also faults him for not mentioning male and female equality in creation, as the image of God — a gap easily filled by further reading in Ellul.

Catherine Meeks finds Ellul makes women so different and superior that wholeness and equality seem unattainable.

We should not be surprised that some feminists, at
least, balk at Ellul's insistence on separate roles for women, especially since he proposes their traditional roles as the most ennobling, appropriate and necessary if freedom is to be preserved. Anti-feminists naturally oppose Ellul's insistence on equality, let alone the superiority of women!

To appreciate Ellul's position we must recognize that he does not address the feminist issue - or any other issue, for that matter - because it is presently on nearly everyone's agenda. He consistently opposes such writing and thinking. Rather, he finds himself involved with women's status and roles because he is trying to solve other problems - principally the issues of freedom and the preservation of our society.

The crux of the matter appears to lie in Ellul's belief that women are 'equal but different.' Most feminists seem inclined to an 'equal and similar' theory, whereas anti-feminists prefer to view women as 'different' - and in some cases, inferior. We should perhaps pose the question this way: can women truly be equal if they are different, especially when men try to define this difference for them? 'Separate but equal' failed to produce acceptable results in America's segregated schools, and one wonders if the role of women in society provides us with another example.

On the other hand, if women are conceived as truly equal, can they long to be relegated to the roles men try to consign them to? If nurturing is as important as Ellul seems to believe, why does he resist supporting equal partnership in this activity?

Ellul's own praxis in this regard may help us here: looking back over his life, he finds two activities closest to his heart: his work with youth, and the planting of a church near his home in France: 'because I did it with my wife.' Her role was (and continues to be) that of deaconness, whereas his place involves teaching and preaching. Their partnership made maximum use of the strengths each possessed, so that their roles were different. But he clearly views both as of equal importance.

In more than one sense, then, Mark Olsen's formula in The Other Side (September 1987) rings true: Ellul is a 'feminist without being a feminist.' His principal concern is a matter of life and death for all of us. Feminine values were developed in spite of male dominance, but presently many women are prepared to abandon them in favor of masculine values. If Ellul's analysis is correct, the danger to society is enormous if women decide to be like men and stop being themselves.

Footnotes

6. p. 286.
7. p. 327.
10. Les Combats de la liberté, p. 325.
12. The Subversion of Christianity, pp. 33-34, 92-94.
13. p. 93.
14. p. 74-75.
16. The Subversion of Christianity, pp. 77-83, 90 and 94.
22. Ibid., p. 482; see also p. 428.
23. Les Combats de la liberté, p. 309.
24. Ibid., pp. 326, 328, 332.
25. Ibid., pp. 314-315, 326.
27. p. 25.
28. See Marva Dawn's letter to this effect in the January-February 1988 issue of The Other Side, p. 7. editors have provided an analysis of reader responses to Ellul's views in the November 1987 issue, p. 57.
30. Les Combats de la liberté, pp. 334-335.

Feminine Response (continued from page 7)

History indicates that the desire for domination over others is the root of almost all moral evil - war, human bondage, murder, theft, etc. The promise was made for a Deliverer, and Christ came to set us free from all bondage and oppression. Are the promises to be priests and kings in passages such as Rev. 1:6 and 5:13 for men only? No, all are called, all are commissioned; and no separate moral principles, comands, rewards or promises are made to men and women. We are all called to servanthood, and God is no respecter of persons.

Women held office in the Old Testament too, even though their importance has been played down. What else must Deborah be before she is accepted when she held office as judge, prophet, and military leader? (Judges 4:4). Hulda was given a very important message at a crucial time in Israel when the Bible was lost (II Kings 22 and II Chronicles 34). The great contemporary prophet was Jeremiah, and Zephaniah too was active. (continued on page 11)