

Suspicion, Accusation, Fragmentation

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One of my favorite Ellul books is *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (1972; ET 1973). I love the reflections on hope, of course. But a section of the book on “the age of suspicion” has always struck me as especially insightful.

Ellul writes: “Nothing is any longer itself. We have learned to look behind and beyond for the nameless, the elusive, the wriggly depths, the hidden forces, the secrets. Such is the supreme lucidity to which we are condemned. It is a strange evolution whereby, beginning with the thinking of a few, suspicion has spread through all the intellectuals, and from there is taking hold of everyone” (*Hope*, p. 48).

The three great “malefactors” here, according to Ellul, are Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Marx taught us to look beneath the surface and discern the economic class interests which are the true reality and agenda behind our surface words and acts. Nietzsche taught us to see a manipulative quest for power behind everything. And Freud urged us to see unconscious sexual and psychological forces beneath the surface.

“School of suspicion---that, in fact, is what it all comes back to. We have learned no longer to place our confidence in anything, no longer to have faith in anyone, no longer to believe a person’s word, nor in a sentiment, no longer to accept the lasting quality of a relationship, no longer to believe that it could be authentic or truly representative of the person. We have learned that every good feeling merely expresses some self-satisfaction or some hypocrisy, that all virtue is a lie, that all morality is false, that all devotion is vain or a sham, that all speech hides the truth” (p. 50).

“The era of a chance to hope is gone, for there is no hope where suspicion is king. Every time a possibility, a breakthrough, or a meaning takes shape, immediately the question bursts in on us, ‘From what social class, from what complex, from what ideology, from what myth, from what interest does this hope spring, since it is nothing but the falsification of a situation one has refused to face?’” (p. 52).

Alas, the loss of hope is not yet the end of suspicion’s trail. When one does not keep one’s suspicion to oneself but voices it as an *accusation*, the consequences are still more dire.

In *Apocalypse*, Ellul comments on the important text about the cosmic war between the angelic and demonic forces: “The Satan, the accuser, completes the work of the Devil in launching accusation, either before God to accuse men, or between men. *Every accusation is the work of Satan*” (*Apocalypse* (1975; ET 1977), p. 87; italics added).

Martin Luther is reported to have said that the Christian thing to do is always to “put the best possible construction” on other people’s words and deeds.

“People look on the outward appearance---the Lord looks on the heart,” God said to the prophet Samuel when he visited Jesse’s family looking for a future king to anoint. Of course, the heart, the feelings, intentions, and internal side, are critically important. But only God knows this reality. We human beings are pathetically off base in making judgments about people’s motives and intentions.

If we care about someone’s motivations, we should *ask them* about it—not just speculate and project our paranoid thinking on them---and then make it worse by spouting off our libelous accusations to those around us.

We don’t want to be gullible and naïve but when there really is no *concrete* evidence of another’s bad faith, it is wrong and bad to go this route. It is incredibly destructive to go through life as a paranoid, suspicious accuser of others. It is anti-Ellulian and anti-Christian, if either of those matter. It is

destructive of families, friendships, projects, churches, organizations, and important causes. It is withering and destructive of the paranoid self per se, which lives in darkness and bitterness.

Suspicion and accusation have poisoned and paralyzed political discourse. Example: Because former Clinton V-P Al Gore was the narrator, paranoid, suspicious American neo-cons reject without a hearing the photos, temperature readings, etc., regarding global warming in the recent documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* (as though Gore himself faked the photos of receding glaciers and polar ice caps!).

But it's not just a disease of big time politics: family members, colleagues who could be working together, people who should be on the same side, same team, sometimes allow their suspicion, paranoia, and accusation to fragment relationships. Whenever it's up to us, let's choose grace, hope, and community.