

INTRODUCTION

Choosing Life and the Possibility of History: An Introduction to the Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul

Life

THE CONTOURS OF ELLUL'S life have been documented well enough in several places,¹ but since he "never writes ideas—only my experiences," a brief synopsis is in order. Born as an only child in 1912, Jacques Ellul inherited both the aristocratic values and chronic poverty of his grandparents and father, both of whom had once been wealthy only to experience extreme poverty during the depression years. He recounts this experience as decisive for understanding his development. In order to support his family, Ellul began working as a young teenager and by age eighteen was giving three to four hours of lessons daily in German, French, Latin, and Greek.

About this time Ellul happened to read a copy of Marx's *Das Kapital*, borrowed from the library, an experience which

1. See his autobiographical works: *In Season, Out of Season*; *Perspectives On Our Age*; and *Ce que je crois*, which Eerdmans Publishing Company is

he found almost revelatory for it provided him not only with a global interpretation of the world but also an explanation of his everyday practical experiences, such as his father's unemployment. Although Ellul never joined the Communist Party, like Marx he remained convinced that understanding the material forces of society holds the key to interpreting our world. For him the constituent element of society is *technique*, and he suggests that if Marx were alive today he would study it and not money.

About this time Ellul underwent another conversion, this time to Jesus Christ. Having had virtually no religious upbringing (he describes his father as a Voltairian), Ellul read the Bible and experienced a conversion which he refuses to discuss except to say that it was "sudden and violent." This commitment to Jesus Christ supplied what he found sorely lacking in Marx. Marx, he said, could explain his material situation, but not his personal condition or the larger existential questions of life, death, love, and the meaning of human life and history. Though he remains "quite influenced" by Marx, he is "extremely critical" of his thinking for another reason. Marx's thinking was more passionate than scientific and thus blind to its own biases—seen, for example, in his beliefs in the inevitable progress of history and the reductionistic characterization of human identity to work.

Thus, Marx and Jesus Christ form Ellul's two "real sources" and catalyzed a lifelong dialogue:

I thus remained unable to eliminate Marx, unable to eliminate the biblical revelation, and unable to merge the two. For me, it was impossible to put them together. So I

publishing in English translation in 1989. For the primary and secondary works see Joyce Hanks' definitive *Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1984), which has a supplemental volume due out in the future. Ellul has also written an autobiography which remains unpublished.

began to be torn between the two, and I have remained so all my life. The development of my thinking can be explained with this contradiction.²

Again:

I was thus placed in a contradiction because I did not create two separate domains. I realized that Christianity was a totality implying an ethic in all areas, and that Marx too claimed to be a totality. I was sometimes torn between the two extremes, and sometimes reconciled; but I absolutely refused to abandon either one. I lived my entire intellectual life in this manner. It was thus that I was progressively led to develop a dialectical mode of thinking which I constantly made my foundation.³

This double conversion forms the key to understanding Ellul's work, and we shall examine his dialectical method below. From the very beginning Ellul set himself to understand the concrete sociological realities of the world and the revelation of Jesus Christ contained in the Scriptures, for the peculiar nature of people is that they exist simultaneously as both matter and spirit and must be studied as such.

After receiving a doctorate in law from the University of Bordeaux Faculty of Law (1936), Ellul taught at Montpellier (1937) and the University of Strasbourg at Clermont-Ferrand (1938-40). In 1940 the Vichy government fired him for his resistance to Marshal Pétain's government, after which he returned to Bordeaux. Within three weeks the Germans arrested his father and a friend informed him that his wife was

2. Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), p. 16.

3. Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives On Our Age* (New York: Seabury, 1981), p. 15.

likewise targeted (she was born in Holland and carried a British passport). Out of necessity he "vanished into the countryside" to Martres, some fifty kilometers from Bordeaux. For the next few years he participated actively in the Resistance movement while supporting his family by farming with peasant people, Ellul tending the corn, potatoes, and sheep while his wife raised chickens and rabbits. During these years Ellul also pastored a church, an experience he would repeat in the future, and studied theology through Strasbourg, although he never wrote the thesis for the formal degree.

In 1943 Ellul was awarded the "agrégation."⁴ After the war he served a stint as a deputy mayor of Bordeaux (1944-46), believing that a true revolution of society from the ground up would be possible due to the war having demolished almost every facet of society's infrastructure. This he counts as one of his greatest misjudgments, for it was not many years before the political and economic status quo once again controlled all power. The mayoral experience thoroughly disillusioned Ellul and, because of his firsthand experience, convinced him forever of the absolute powerlessness of politics to bring anything but cosmetic changes to society. In 1947 he assumed a post at the Institute of Political Studies in Bordeaux, where he remained until his retirement in 1980. During this time he also served at Bordeaux's Faculty of Law (1943-80).

Throughout his life Ellul has incarnated his belief that "intellectual interest means concrete commitment." His whirlwind of constructive engagements has taken him far beyond the professor's lectern or writing desk (50 books and 1500 articles, with translations into at least a dozen foreign languages). From 1947-51 he served with the World Council of Churches, an affiliation he discontinued because of what

4. The "agrégation" is the highest competitive exam for university professors in France. Ellul's award was based on an examination and his book on the French Reformed churches (see bibliography).

he considered its platitudinous pronouncements and blindness to the paralyzing effects of ideology. For twenty years he labored on the National Council of the Reformed Church of France, giving special attention to the revision of seminary curricula (1951-70). Environmental concerns (he used to take regular camping trips with his students) led him to help form the "Committee for the Defense of the Aquitainian Coast," which Ellul served for a term as president. The group protested the government's commercial development of the Aquitaine coast near Bordeaux. From 1945-55 he directed a film club in Bordeaux which analyzed current cinema. Since 1970 he has edited the journal *Foi et Vie*.

Two projects, though, have brought special satisfaction to Ellul.⁵ First, along with his wife he helped to establish a parish in Bordeaux composed of working-class people. Begun in 1953 in Ellul's home, the church grew from ten people to over fifty families. In 1960 the church built its own building and obtained a pastor. Second, in 1958 he began to work with the delinquent youth of Bordeaux with Yves Charrier (although he always contends that we need to question whether it is the person or society that is maladjusted).⁶ Far ahead of their time, they formed clubs, recruited a staff, and developed a "philosophy of prevention" which, instead of making youth adapted to society, helped them to become "positively maladjusted." This eventually led to the National Committee for Unity between Clubs and Teams of Prevention, which Ellul headed until 1977.

Before moving on to discuss Ellul's dialectical method, his corpus, and *The Presence of the Kingdom*, mention should be made of two other formative influences on his intellectual development that complement Marx. He writes that his deep

5. See my "Interview with Jacques Ellul," *Media Development* (2/1988): 26-27.

6. See his *Jeunesse délinquante*, in collaboration with Yves Charrier; and Chapter 9 of *In Season, Out of Season*, "With the Street Gangs."

and distant roots are "nourished in the ever fertile soil of Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth."⁷ He refers to Barth as "the second great element" in his scholarly pilgrimage, and expresses amazement at those who consider him passé. Instead, Ellul finds him a rich resource whose theological implications are yet to be exhausted.⁸ It is simply misleading, though, to label Ellul a Barthian (or anything else for that matter), for in many ways he diverges from the Swiss thinker.⁹

Just as important for understanding Ellul is the influence of Kierkegaard, perhaps seen best in his work *The Subversion of Christianity*, which David W. Gill has rightly observed restates for the twentieth century the question which Kierkegaard raised for the previous one: why is Christendom so little like biblical Christianity? Vernard Eller may well be correct to contend that it is the melancholy Dane and not the Swiss theologian whom Ellul most resembles.¹⁰ Still, Ellul freely and often charts his own course so that any implication of a slavish adherence to Barth or Kierkegaard simply generates misinterpretations.

Ellul's Dialectic

Perhaps the single most important factor for Ellul interpretation is an understanding of his passionate adherence to dialectic. "I am a dialectician above all; I believe

7. Jacques Ellul, *Living Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), p. ix.

8. See "Karl Barth and Us," *Sojourners* (December 1978) and Geoffrey Bromiley's essay "Barth's Influence on Jacques Ellul" in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, edited by Clifford Christians and Jay M. Van Hook (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981).

9. See my *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul* (Lanham, Mar.: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 10-13.

10. Vernard Eller, "Ellul and Kierkegaard: Closer than Brothers," in *Christians and Van Hook*, p. 52.

nothing can be understood without dialectical analysis."¹¹

More recently Ellul has written:

[T]here is a dialectic within my work, and it is entirely central in that I have discovered progressively that in the world we live in there are no means of thinking and acquiring knowledge that are not of a dialectical nature. . . . I became conscious, as I worked and thought, that I needed to interpret all things dialectically.¹²

Any unwillingness or inability to appreciate this aspect of his thought almost always ends up grossly distorting his works. The continual charge that he is a fatalistic pessimist, for example, fails to see that for Ellul, like Hegel, there is a positivity in the negative, and that he is, in fact, an unabashed optimist who believes in the universal salvation of all creation.

In a general sense dialectic implies an exchange or a dialogue (*dialogein*), such as that which Ellul intends to provoke with his readers. More specifically, "dialectic is a procedure that does not exclude contraries, but includes them."¹³ As we hinted above, Ellul's roots in dialectic reach back to his double conversion. For Marx, of course, history progressed dialectically by means of the interplay of competing or contradictory elements which did not nullify each other but rather gave rise to a new situation. Perhaps more important is Ellul's view of biblical dialectic. While one might speak of dialectic originating with Heraclitus, Zeno, or the like, he contends that the Hebrews of the eighth century B.C. were the true progenitors. "Only dialectical thinking can give a proper account of scriptural revelation, such revelation itself

11. Jacques Ellul, "Interviews with Jacques Ellul," in David C. Menninger, "Technique and Politics: The Political Thought of Jacques Ellul" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Riverside, 1974), p. 224.

12. Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, pp. 201-202.

13. Ellul, *Perspectives On Our Age*, p. 7.

being fundamentally and intrinsically dialectical."¹⁴ In the Bible, he writes, "we constantly see two contradictory, apparently irreconcilable things affirmed, and we are told that they always meet to wind up in a new situation."¹⁵ He gives several examples to illustrate this: God is beyond time and history, but with the incarnation He enters both. Dialectical tension exists between the Already and Not Yet of the eschaton. Salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9) but also by works (Phil. 2:12-13). Finally, history is the arena of God's activity and for that reason not unimportant or negligible, but it does, nevertheless, move toward decisive judgment and catastrophe.¹⁶ Obviously, when Ellul read Barth, he found a theological counterpart to the role Marx played for him on the social scientific level.

Dialectic in Ellul's thought functions at three interrelated levels. At what we might call the historical and epistemological levels there is "a dialectic of *ideas*, but perhaps also a dialectic of facts, of *reality*."¹⁷ In other words, dialectic for Ellul refers to a description of reality, the real in history, and a mode of thinking or way of knowing by which we understand that reality. Related to both of these is his theological dialectic which combines both the epistemological and the historical in a dialectical hermeneutic to interpret Scripture and an agonistic "style of life."

On the historical level, Ellul contends that dialectic "always claims to have to do with the real, to be a means of taking account of the real."¹⁸ Contradictory factors inhere in the very nature of reality, positive and negative elements which do not cancel out each other but interact so as to modify a situation. As we noted above, Ellul refers to Hegel

14. Jacques Ellul, "On Dialectic," in *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, p. 304. This is Ellul's most concise explanation of dialectic, and Chapter 4 in *Ce que je crois* (Paris: Grasset, 1987), entitled "La dialectique," is an almost verbatim repetition of it.

15. Ellul, *Perspectives On Our Age*, p. 8.

16. All these examples are taken from Ellul's "On Dialectic."

17. Ellul, "On Dialectic," p. 293. My emphasis.

18. Ibid.

here, seeing the contradictory elements in history as having a wholly positive function (which is not to say, like Marx, that history is "progressing," which position Ellul rejects). Indeed, the coexistence of mutually opposing factors constitutes the *sine qua non* of a healthy society, while historical sclerosis and uncontested homogeneity mark a totalitarian or even utopian situation where the possibility of meaningful history ceases. The "supreme evil" is "paralysis, entropy, repetition, identicalness, unity, duplication."¹⁹ Ellul's denunciation of *technique*, for example, is not directed at *technique* per se, but at its hegemonizing and heteronomous effects on society which progressively eliminate all dialectical tensions in favor of cultural assimilation. This view of history, then, places a great premium on human choices and decisions, for fate operates when people give up. Dialectic as the real in history "implies the certitude of human responsibility and therefore a freedom of choice and decision."²⁰

What, exactly, are the dialectical components of history? Boli-Bennett, observing that for Ellul dialectic constitutes "the very fabric of life . . . the very core of reality," locates five factors in Ellul's dialectic of social reality. Dialectical tension exists between ideology and reality, action and consequences, the whole and the parts, social and spiritual reality, and in the radical ambivalence of action.²¹ In his commentary *Apocalypse* Ellul suggests that the book of Revelation is the book of all human history, and that this history is not the product of chance or mechanistic causality but the dialectical interplay of the will of the Lord, the will of men, and certain "abstract forces."²² Later in the same book he specifies six concrete components driving history's dialectic: political power, economic power, forces of destruction and

19. Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 223.

20. Ellul, "On Dialectic," p. 297.

21. John Boli-Bennett, "The Absolute Dialectics of Jacques Ellul," in *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, edited by Paul T. Durbin, vol. 3 (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1980), pp. 171-201.

22. Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse; The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1977), p. 56.

negation, the Word of God, the prayers of his people, and the setting apart of God's people (Ellul does not intend the list to be exhaustive). Given his view of history, it is easy to see why Ellul has devoted a whole track of his studies to sociological investigations (primarily *technique*, propaganda, politics, and human institutions).²³ Temple has even referred to Ellul as a "phenomenologist," by which she means not any adherence to the school of philosophy by that name but his endeavor to locate and analyze the real phenomena of everyday life.²⁴

Dialectic also appears in Ellul's work as an epistemological tool. That is, not only is reality itself fraught with contradictory and opposing elements, but so is our means for apprehending that reality. Several nuances are apparent in Ellul's use of dialectic as an epistemological tool.

Ellul's thinking is dialectical in the Socratic sense of the word in that like Kierkegaard, whose admiration for Socrates is well known, all of Ellul's writings have a maieutic function. Their purpose is to provoke a critical dialogue with the reader in order to force him or her to make a decision. "All Socrates' teaching," writes Ellul, "takes place within the framework of a dialogue, in which two speakers provide each other with the opportunity to find themselves and be born."²⁵ Furthermore, he refuses to provide readers with answers, insisting that this is their unique responsibility. The Socratic dialectic also requires the criticism of commonplace opinions, something for which Ellul is infamous (cf. his *Critique of the New Commonplaces*). Playing the role of the Socratic gadfly who helps people to shake off the perils of deadly slumber and gain

23. Ellul's five-volume magnum opus, *Histoire des institutions*, continues as a standard text in French universities.

24. See Katharine Temple, "The Task of Jacques Ellul: A Proclamation of Biblical Faith as a Requisite for Understanding the Modern Project" (Ph.D. diss., McMaster University, Canada, 1976), especially Chapter 2, "Fact, Reality, the Sacred, and Myth."

25. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 38.

new levels of critical awareness, his works are "a call to the sleeper to awake."²⁶ Again, failure to understand this goal of Ellul has led to misinterpretations. His constant barrage of critical opinions have never intended to castigate.

The motive was always to help my friends progress. But in general I was interpreted just the opposite. The moment I began to criticize Barth, I was an anti-Barthian. When I criticized the socialists I was a rightist. It was completely contrary to my desire when I criticized the socialists—it was to help them make some progress.²⁷

Ellul's epistemology is dialectical in another sense. At times he rejects Aristotelian linear logic as a fully adequate tool. Care should be taken, though, not to imply that he disparages human reason or logic as useless. He simply wants to curtail the hubris sometimes associated with its use. Temple rightly observes:

Reason, in short, [for Ellul] is a relative faculty, but not a nonfaculty. In order to confront reality, people *need* to use reason. . . . To give up the function of reason altogether leads to the retreat into the irrational. At the same time, he warns against the tendency to try to force reason to exceed its limits.²⁸

Human reason must recognize its boundaries and avoid, as Temple observes, the fallacies of both rationalism and irrationalism.

The influences of Marx and Barth have generated another and larger epistemological dialectic: that between Ellul's sociology and theology. Marx convinced Ellul of the

26. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1964), p. xxxiii.

27. Ellul, in Clendenin, "Interview with Jacques Ellul," p. 28.

28. Katharine Temple, "The Sociology of Jacques Ellul," in *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 3, p. 225.

need for a rigorous, strictly social scientific study of the material conditions which shape our lives. The biblical revelation provides the dialectical counterpoint to this as the basis for studying people as spiritual beings. According to Ellul, these two perspectives must never be separated or synthesized. They must continue to coexist in a relation that is dialectical and mutually critical.

In a sense these two tracks of study are separate. No faith commitment is required for his sociological analyses; they stand or fall as strictly social scientific studies and do not depend on any theological biases. Likewise, the biblical revelation speaks a word of its own. Nevertheless, the sociological and theological studies are very much related in a reciprocal fashion:

I found myself forced to affirm both the independence of the analysis of contemporary society, and the specificity of theology, both the coherence and importance of the world in which we live and also the truth without common measure of the revelation in Christ—two factors both alien and yet also indissolubly bound to one another. The relation, then, could only be dialectical. . . . I was thus led to work in two separate spheres, one historical and sociological, the other theological. . . . Each work would have to be exactly equal and as immune as possible from contamination by the other.²⁹

The two realms exist not merely to complement each other but to provide a framework of confrontation and mutual criticism.

Sociology serves a critical function on behalf of theology in at least three ways. First, it forces theology to be relevant by identifying the pertinent questions and strategic factors that shape human life at any given point. It also forces theology to remain concrete, for its constant temptation is to drift off into

29. Ellul, "On Dialectic," pp. 305-306.

the purely abstract and ideal, asking metaphysical questions *sub specie aeternitatis* it can never answer. Third, sociology helps the church community to examine itself in order to determine the degree to which it functions purely in a sociologically determined fashion without any Christian distinctives. In other words, it helps the church to avoid blatant conformity to the world. To summarize:

We must seek the deepest possible sociological understanding of the world we live in, apply the best methods, refrain from tampering with the results of our research on the ground that they are "spiritually" embarrassing, maintaining complete clarity and realism—all in order to find out, as precisely as may be, where we are and what we are doing, and also what lines of action are open to us.³⁰

But theology likewise provides a critical counterpoint for sociology, primarily by forcing it to be wholistic. Many sociologists claim to be purists who disavow any interest in values or meaning and who attempt a neutral appraisal of phenomena which results in a mathematical conclusion. Besides being idealistic and naive, this approach tends to become reductionistic—defining people, for example, only in relationship to their work (*homo faber*) or economic activity (*homo oeconomicus*). In the process, the spiritual nature of people is neglected.

When we look at Ellul's entire corpus we see the result of this consciously conceived dialectic as an epistemological tool to comprehend reality. With a methodological plan conceived as early as 1942-43, and from which he has never departed, Ellul's works form a whole:

The writing I had undertaken in a tentative frame of mind assumed a progressively better structure. The whole of it is a composition in counterpoint. Every sociological analysis of

30. Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of these Ten Years," *The Christian Century* 87.7 (February 18, 1970), p. 201.

mine is answered (not in the sense of replying, but in that of noting the other dialectical pole) by a biblical or theological analysis.³¹

To *The Technological Society* correspond *The Meaning of the City* (the city epitomizing human technique) and *Apocalypse*, which "sets forth the dialectical position I can have in regard to society, human works, and especially technique."³² *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* brings a dialectical counterpoint to *The Political Illusion*. The consequence of this overarching dialectic throughout all of his works is that one must read widely in his corpus or risk misinterpretation.

At a third level, the theological one, the historical and epistemological dialectics combine. According to Ellul the biblical revelation provides the prototypical dialectic, for dialectic "is specifically a biblical concept," in contrast to philosophical thinking which tends to resolve and eliminate contradictions.³³ This biblical or theological dialectic functions at both of the levels just discussed: it is a mode of thinking, an epistemological orientation by which one understands the scriptures, and a mode of Christian existence or "style of life" within history itself.

In addition to the five examples of biblical dialectic already mentioned, several others demonstrate just how thoroughly Ellul carries out this hermeneutic. He interprets the Bible as a whole and each of its individual topics dialectically. His works on 2 Kings (*The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*) and Revelation (*Apocalypse*) stand in dialectical relation to other books in his corpus, and the text itself, in its structure, movement, organization, and relation to culture, is read dialectically.³⁴

We also see this by looking at how Ellul treats scriptural themes. Four examples stand out. His comments on natural or

31. Ibid.

32. See *Apocalypse*, p. 13.

33. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, p. 253.

34. Ellul, *Apocalypse*, pp. 52-54.

positive law lead one to think he is an absolute iconoclast, but a closer reading which takes account of the dialectic shows that he considers civil law to be ordained by God, serving not only a useful but indispensable function.³⁵ A reciprocal relationship exists between divine and human law which prohibits any dichotomy between them, and thus the Christian must cultivate a "double attitude" to civil law.³⁶ While recognizing the God-appointed role of civil law, the Christian never imagines that it can embody true justice or goodness. Human law exists as "an intermediate entity" between God's original covenant and the final eschaton. It is a relative institution, but not merely relative, "because God endows it with dignity."³⁷ Only the dialectical perspective does justice to both perspectives.

Closely related to this treatment of divine and human law is Ellul's position on the state. "The biblical perspective sees the state as ordained by God, in harmony with the divine order, and at the same time as the Beast of the Abyss, the Great Babylon."³⁸ It has been given the sword to restrain evil and promote good but at the same time has inflicted pain and suffering upon untold millions. While many Christians are quick to justify the state based on passages such as Romans 13, Ellul, without denying those passages, draws our attention to the other pole of the dialectic by pointing out passages such as 1 Samuel 8, Zechariah 11:6, Ecclesiastes, Matthew 4:9 and 23:4, and 1 Corinthians 15:24—all of which cast the state in a somewhat negative light and challenge its validity. Christians must never separate themselves from the political arena, for that would grant the state more uncontested power, but their involvement must involve "a subtle interplay of No and Yes, of approval and rejection, of caution and support, of

35. Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 68.

36. Ibid., p. 100.

37. Ibid., p. 94.

38. Jacques Ellul, *Violence; Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (New York: Seabury, 1969), p. 2.

impulsion and restraint."³⁹ In short, the hermeneutic of dialectic issues forth in a dialectical mode of life.

A third example of this biblical dialectic is money: "The Bible contains contradictory texts about wealth."⁴⁰ Several New Testament passages seem to condemn it and refer to it as a demon or false god, while some Old Testament texts "present wealth as a blessing, willed by God and pleasing to Him."⁴¹

A final example is Ellul's treatment of "the world." Ellul, as we have noted, is infamous for his reputed negativism, and it is easy to see why some label him as a world-denying pessimist. But this reading of him is possible only to the extent that one disregards his dialectical interpretation of Scripture which demands that one embrace "the Bible's double affirmation" about the world, that it is both loved and lost.⁴² The dialectic sees the world as the realm of absolute rebellion and radical evil, but still of infinite value to God because of his irrevocable love.⁴³ His teaching on the city likewise reflects the "double attitude" required by the biblical text. The city is the purest form of *technique*, the epitome of human pride and self-sufficiency, but at the same time the model of the heavenly Jerusalem. Those who neglect the dialectic either baptize the world without discrimination or categorically condemn it and withdraw—neither of which, according to Ellul, does justice to the text.

In addition to serving as an epistemological tool, the theological dialectic issues forth as a style of life within history itself; it requires a peculiar mode of Christian existence. Dialectical tensions characterize the Christian life: "We are invited to take part in a dialectic, to be in the world

39. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 434-435.

40. Jacques Ellul, *Money and Power* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 35.

41. Ibid.

42. Ellul, *Violence*, p. 122.

43. See Ellul's article " 'The World' in the Gospels," *Katallagete* 5.1 (Spring 1974): 16-23.

but not of it."⁴⁴ To use the metaphor of the city, Christians are to be city dwellers but not city builders, fully participating in its life but maintaining "a dialectic between staying and leaving, preserving and judgment."⁴⁵

Christian existence operates at the juncture or boundary between two realms, the Already and Not Yet of God's kingdom, and this forces the Christian into what Ellul calls an "agonistic" style of life: literally, a contest or struggling.⁴⁶ Thus, the believer lives "at the point of contact between two currents: the will of the Lord, and the will of the world."⁴⁷ By living out this boundary line existence, which is admittedly agonistic, the Christian reintroduces true dialectical tensions and creative, revolutionary possibilities within the historical process. In short, the Christian acts as a fermenting factor within history, and should, when the dialectic is lived out,

play the most fruitful, the most positive, the most original role possible: putting the tension into society and thus keeping it alive. He restores society's ability to develop. He offers a truly revolutionary interpretation of life. And it is precisely he alone who can play this role. He causes positive, living, and fruitful contradiction to gush forth in the heart of a society which prefers to be simplex and which pretends to deny and resolve the contradictions . . . This contradiction is not something to avoid. It needs rather to be brought out as strongly as possible, not for opposition's sake, but in order that this man, this society, this state, even if one is opposed to them, should live; for without this contradiction they would die.⁴⁸

44. Ellul, *Violence*, p. 26.

45. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), pp. 74-75, 84.

46. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951), pp. 20-21.

47. Ibid., p. 27.

48. Jacques Ellul, *To Will and to Do* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969), pp. 107-108.

Armed with a dialectical interpretation of Scripture, the whole of Christian existence works out a dialectical relationship in the world.

The Presence of the Kingdom

First published in 1948 (Geneva: Roulet), and later in England (London: SCM Press, 1951) and the United States (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951; then New York: Seabury, 1967), *Présence au monde moderne: Problèmes de la civilisation post-chrétienne* is one of Ellul's shortest but most seminal works. He has often remarked that it serves as an introduction to his entire corpus. This is so not in a formal but in a material way, for *The Presence of the Kingdom* contains in germinal form ideas and themes which in later works reach full maturity and find specialized treatment. For this reason its republication is an especially welcome occasion.

The book deserves a wide readership not only because it is the necessary primer for all Ellul study (it is the first book one should read by him), but because it examines issues that remain perennial problems in church and society. Far from being a popular writer who generalizes about trendy issues (as is sometimes said of him), Ellul demonstrates in this book a timeless quality in his ability to examine issues far ahead of his time in a creative way. Despite its having been written a generation ago, *The Presence of the Kingdom* will provoke new dialogue today (see his Preface). Several of its themes deserve special mention.

According to Ellul, human history does not unfold by any logical or causal process, and much less by any divine predeterminism (he would never consider the question from that perspective anyway). Rather, he contends that history is open, that there is an ambiguity in its direction that depends in a radical way upon the choices people make. If in the past Ellul has sounded as if he believes that history is locked into an undeviating course of despair and fatalism, that is only be-

cause he judges that we have persistently made poor choices—or, worse still and more often the case, no choice at all (“fate operates only when people give up”).

In his most recent writings, Ellul draws our attention to the idea that, according to the biblical revelation, today we live in the seventh day of creation.⁴⁹ This is the day of “God’s rest” when human activity assumes eternal importance. This view rejects the God of mechanistic providence (as he says in *The Presence of the Kingdom*, God does not drive history as a chauffeur drives a car), but neither does it imply that God is indifferent or absent, for he is supremely a God of love. Once again, we are in the presence of a deeply personal and dialectical relationship between God and humanity. According to the biblical revelation, God never constrains us. He is a God who shocks us by repenting of planned judgment, who changes His plans according to human decisions, who answers prayer, who refuses to violate us, and who patiently suffers our folly. Nevertheless, history is not a random sequence of events without a goal, nor are people completely independent before God. Indeed, the universal salvation of all creation is a fact of which Ellul is certain. We find ourselves confronted with “la grande proclamation”⁵⁰ found in Deuteronomy and repeated throughout the prophets: “I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19). The ambiguity of history awaits the choices we make.

Ellul’s sociological studies have led him to conclude that we have made and continue to make poor choices, so that in a way we have indeed set ourselves on a path of collective suicide. His apocalyptic vision of the world is well-known, but it is good to examine it here. In a sense a type of “necessity” has triumphed. Again, this has no connotation whatsoever of ineluctable destiny or deterministic causality. It means that

49. See his *Ce que je crois*, Part III, Chapter 1, “Le septième jour,” pp. 203-221.

50. Ellul, *Ce que je crois*, p. 209.

responsible human freedom has capitulated and refused to make difficult choices.

We can illustrate this surrender of human freedom through Ellul's treatment of technique. Ellul is by no means an anti-technist. In fact, he has said on several occasions that we might well be served by more, not less, technique; and forty years ago, in the present volume, he declared that God can use technique. Technical progress is "neither exclusively positive nor totally negative . . . [and] I would certainly never wish to maintain that technology was to be deplored."⁵¹ The question is one of means and ends. Ellul defines technique not as machinery or any device or procedure, but as "nothing more than *means* and the *ensemble of means*."⁵² The problem arises, though, when means and ends are separated, so that technical means no longer have any end except absolute, rational efficiency ("the one best way") and are no longer subject to outside value judgments. "The one best way" of efficiency is always the self-selecting and self-justifying end. At this point people no longer have a choice, because technique chooses for them, and all proposed ends become superfluous. Thus technical means have become totalitarian and landed us in an apocalyptic situation.⁵³ We have made our own bed and now we must sleep in it.

Ellul contends, however, that another option remains open to us: the Christian way, which refuses to separate means and ends. In Jesus Christ the means and the end are joined.

51. Jacques Ellul, "The Technological Revolution and Its Moral and Political Consequences," in *The Evolving World and Theology*, edited by Johannes Metz (New York: Paulist Press, 1967), pp. 100, 107. For other refutations of the charge that Ellul rejects technique, see *The Presence of the Kingdom* (pp. 24, 87), *Perspectives On Our Age* (pp. 70, 82, 108), *Autopsy of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1971, p. 275), and *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: Seabury, 1973, pp. 237-238).

52. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, p. 18. Ellul's emphasis.

53. For a fuller treatment of technique, consult Ellul's trilogy: *The Technological Society* (1954), *The Technological System* (1977), and *Le Bluff technologique* (1988). The third volume moves from examining technique to analyzing *technologie* or the various discourses and studies of technique, which studies Ellul considers to be an enormous bluff.

This way demands a revolutionary style of life and "presence" within human history and steadfastly refuses to cave in to despair. What the world needs most Christianity alone can offer—a true revolution within history today. According to Ellul, modern attempts at revolution are dead, and he has written their autopsy.⁵⁴ For Ellul, who is perhaps the first "liberation theologian," Christianity is nothing if it is not revolutionary. But we need to be careful about how we attempt to facilitate the revolution.

Contrary to advocating withdrawal from the world or urging a lifeboat ethic, Ellul challenges us to embrace and preserve the world. God alone will effect our separation in his own time. This resolute engagement requires a dialectical and agonistic style of life which remains very much in the world even as it rejects worldliness (cf. John 17). To be in the world also requires us to understand it in both its material and spiritual aspects, a task Ellul has undertaken in his sociological and theological works and which he challenges us to better. By rejecting the twin perils of spiritualization (which neglects material realities) and capitulation (which simply adopts one of the world's many different options that appears to harmonize with Christianity), the Christian plays a truly creative role and gives meaning and direction to history, which otherwise has no logic or certitude.

Furthermore, what is first required of the Christian is not action (although that cannot be neglected) but a presence, a style of life, an attitude, a special mode of existence. Few people, of course, will find this advice very heartening, but that only reveals our irrepressible predisposition for and enslavement to the alternative of absolute technical efficiency. Authentic Christian existence trusts in the power of the Holy Spirit to give our "presence" a revolutionary and explosive force in history. By incarnating their God-given identity as light, salt, and sheep, Christians effect a present reality of the kingdom of God which will be culminated in the future.

54. See his *Autopsy of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1971).

There are no guarantees, of course, that Christians will effect this revolution. In fact, our track record is mixed at best. But that indicts our own choices, not God's character. Thus:

A Christian ought to understand his responsibility in this adventure, for Christianity (and God) will not act *ipso facto* in this sense. This adventure is not the course of history, which will go on, whether we wish it or not. It may be realized, and it may not be realized. God may act, or He may not act, and when God wishes to act He ought to find instruments which are supple and obedient, ready for His use. We ought to remind ourselves constantly of the lesson given us in the Scriptures, that God rarely acts in a transcendent manner; on the contrary, as a rule He chooses a human instrument to accomplish His work. Now in this work of God, which is actually decisive, will God find the [people] He needs?⁵⁵

Choosing life and integrity for this call to responsibility constitutes the only possibility for meaningful history today.

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55. Ellul, *Presence of the Kingdom*, p. 90.

THE PRESENCE OF THE KINGDOM