

The

Ellul Studies

Forum

A Forum for Theology in a Technological Civilization

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In This Issue: Jacques Ellul as a Theologian for Catholics

It was Martin Marty who once described Jacques Ellul as "the quintessential Protestant" of our time. This issue is devoted to exploring the thesis that this "quintessential Protestant" is also a theologian for Catholics. Back in my "Catholic days" when I first read Ellul, the affinity of his thought with that of both Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton immediately struck me. It is that affinity which is explored in this issue. The work of putting this issue together was made easy by the willingness of Jeff Dietrich and Katharine Temple to allow me to reprint their articles and conversation concerning the suitability of Jacques Ellul's theology for the Catholic Worker movement and its impact upon that movement. These essays first appeared in the *Catholic Agitator* and the *Catholic Worker* which they respectively edit. Following their essays, Gene Davenport explores the parallels between Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on *Technique*. The impact of these various essays, I hope, is to show that although Ellul is not a Catholic theologian he has influenced Catholic thought. This influence is not so much upon the Catholic theological mainstream as it is on the radical anarchistic strand of Catholic thought represented by both the Catholic Worker movement and by Thomas Merton.

In this issue you will also discover reviews of two of Ellul's books recently published by Eerdmans: *The Technological Bluff* and *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*. Although we previously published a review by Gabriel Vahanian of the French edition of *The Technological Bluff* we thought it appropriate to review it again now that an English translation is available. The book on *Ecclesiastes*, however, has not been reviewed here before. You will also find reviews of books by Jeffrey Stout and Gene Davenport. I think you will find them all worth your attention.

The next issue (January 1991) will be devoted to Ellul and the Mass Media under the guest editorship of Clifford Christians. Also, it is important to note the death of Lewis Mumford this past year. He and Jacques Ellul are the two great pioneers of the social and historical study of technology. A future issue will be devoted to Mumford's work. Finally, I announce with sadness the news of the passing of the Mme Yvette Ellul, the wife of Jacques Ellul. Our thoughts and prayers are with Jacques Ellul in his time of loss.

Darrell J. Fasching, Editor

In Memory of Mme Yvette Ellul

by Joyce Hanks

Jacques Ellul's wife of 54 years, Yvette Ellul (née Lensvelt), died on April 16, 1991, of cancer of the pancreas, after a three month illness. She will be remembered not only as Ellul's constant companion, driver, helpmeet, and critic, but as someone who contributed on her own to scholarly reflection. She wrote, for example, a wide-ranging series of articles for the Journal *Foi et Vie* which was edited by her husband for many years. The series, entitled "Chronique des livres oubliés," (Chronicle of forgotten books), analyzed works by Simone Schwarz-Bart, Henry James, and Cheikh Hamidou Kane, among others.

Married in 1937, the Elluls had four children, three of whom survive their mother: Jean, Yves, and Dominique (a daughter). Their second son, Simon, died in 1947 at the age of six.

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Book Reviews

***The Technological Bluff*, by Jacques Ellul, Translated by G. Bromiley. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 418 pp.**

Reviewed by Nicola Hoggard Creegan

T*he Technological Bluff* is a big dense book, a metadiscourse on the discourse of bluff, by a man who thought he had written his last words in *The Reason for Being*. No one will be surprised that Ellul argues that technique is autonomous, fragile, unpredictable, costly, wasteful, often useless, ugly, ambivalent and ambiguous. But developments in the last ten years have convinced him of the need to write another book about technology. The level of technique now reached—computers, lasers, genetic engineering and space research—together with the discourse on technique, which lauds its positive aspects and ignores the negative, has driven us into an all pervasive technical lifeworld. But this world is a bluff; we do not see the seriousness of our situation, and in fact we are persuaded to think it quite otherwise than it is. This bluff is a "terrorism," in the sense of "molding the unconscious with no possibility of resistance."

Ellul sets out to expose the fragility of technique and of the bluff surrounding it. He is not against technique; he is not for it. But in this book he postulates that with the increasing sophistication of technique there are escalating problems, these problems are inseparable from the positive gains, and the hazards are inherently unpredictable. The stakes are infinite and the potential losses absolute. Technique, then, reveals itself as more inherently problematic than ever, even without the lack of critical reflection and bluff which render it deadly; if technique were subservient to moral reasoning and higher values, Ellul hints, we might have decided that some techniques were not worth the risks. In this regard, and lest we get lost in this meta-level discourse, Ellul reminds us more than once that the common car kills a thousand people a month in France. It is, he says, "the great symbol of diversion and the associated emptying out of reality and truth."

What is this bluff? Ellul describes it as "the rearranging of everything in terms of technical progress." It is "a demonstration of the prodigious power, diversity, success, universal application, and impeccability of techniques." Technique, he explains, is seen *a priori* as the way to progress, and the answer to all collective and individual problems—including those it causes. Positive aspects are magnified, and negative ones concealed. By bluff we come to live in a world of "diversion and illusion."

This bluff is based upon a changed ideology of science—a soteriology of science, on a changed rationality—as justification for power, and on the suppression of moral judgments. Politicians and technicians are among those who consciously lead the adaptation to technique and are hence the main instigators of bluff. Unwitting, spontaneous bluffers include intellectuals, driven by their fascination with technique, and their unwillingness to appear out of date. This bluff creates and is created by a world in which knowledge is power, a world of experts and technocrats, of cooperation between universities and big isolated centers of technical research—the technopolis.

Why is the bluff able to work? It is all encompassing, Ellul suggests. Moreover, the positive aspects are easy to articulate and see while the negative aspects are always "vague phenomena, which are significant only by their bulk and their general nature...but [which] eventually give a certain negative style to human life." Time

and space are distorted, and access to nature is limited. "People are being plunged into an artificial world which will cause them to lose their sense of reality and to abandon their search for truth." But the bluff obscures that which is lost. Furthermore, the discourse on technique claims most in exactly those areas in which it is failing; there is talk of technical culture, human mastery of technique, technique is said to be rational and human. This is a bluff, argues Ellul. Technical culture is not possible, people live in networks rather than communities, the basis for rationality has changed, and with the advent of the computer, technique has "definitively escaped from control by human will." Moreover, it marginalizes huge numbers of people, causing unemployment, and social instability.

This leads us, Ellul claims, into a world of absurdity. Technique and its attendant discourse have brought us close to the scenario of the philosophers of the absurd. There is economic absurdity, for example, in Western economies which rely upon the manufacture and consumption of useless gadgets while Third World economies are unable to meet basic needs. There is absurdity in the ability of scientists to manipulate genetic material while being unable to know what kind of genetic model they would desire. There is absurdity in the lack of existential freedom and psychological impotence effected by the escalating diversity of choices technique appears to offer.

Here, as with other Ellulian denouncements of modernity, one reads and wishes to say it is hyperbolic. After all, here I am writing this review, reading the book, in the time saved by technique. I am using a word processor, for a computer-dependent *Forum*. But yes, I hear Ellul reminding me that I am not counting or even seeing the global and personal costs. And although one might feel some resistance, one is relieved, also, that so much of the burden of modern reality is explained by his analysis. On the one hand, like his mentor, Kierkegaard, he draws us into dialogue with ourselves and our culture, to recognition and affirmation. On the other hand one feels the caution one must feel faced with a deluge of facts about things that go wrong, and brought to synthesis by a powerful mind. My intuitions affirm his stance, but my caution reminds me that though his arguments are compelling, the facts upon which they are based were selected and others rejected. Is this a valid and prophetic picture of our life in modernity? If a prophet's validity is to be found in predictive power Ellul has already shown his credentials; and in light of the recent war, we should note well that one of the warnings in this volume is that "the conflicts which divide multinational concerns, supranational movements,...and nations are now extremely violent, a violence both expressed and enhanced by the multiplicity of techniques, and yet...on the other hand the violence of the confrontations masks the nullity of the stakes."

This is not a theological work, but it is in a dialectical relationship with his theological work. The burden of Ellul's analysis should be understood in the light of his underlying belief that all systems and worldly powers are deceptively bent on destruction. The exposing of the weakness of technique and the false reality in which we live must be juxtaposed to his affirmation of Word as truth, the answer only barely hinted at here, when he affirms that the spiritual and the scientific must listen to each other and that science must remember that "ultimate reality cannot be grasped."

But when he has pushed us to despair at the lifeworld in which we live and with which we inevitably cooperate what are we to do?

Television is a god in this society, he claims. Ellul watches television for the purposes of understanding the world he critiques.

We are left to ponder how we might raise children who as yet have no critical skills in an audio visual world. Ellul always resists answers, always resists systems, and this of course is both frustrating and gratifying. In this book he responds only with the hope that in spite of our being "radically determined" the internal contradictions of the bluff will cause its disintegration. He dares to hope that this will cost as little as possible, and that as individuals we must recognize the "little cracks of freedom" and "install in them a trembling freedom."

I have always been intrigued by Ellul's Kierkegaardian emphasis upon the individual as the answer to collective necessity and evil. After all, only the individual has the freedom capable of opposing the necessity of systems and institutions bound by technique and bluff. But are there not also corporate dimensions to Word, grace and freedom? Ellul offers solutions only as brief sketchy afterword; he wants us to think them out for ourselves. But we might wish that these last paragraphs were longer, if not another book.

Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes
by Jacques Ellul. Translated by Joyce Main Hanks. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990, 306pp.

Reviewed by Daniel Clendenin

A commentary on a biblical text that warns against the writing of books?! Ellul, of course, delights in this paradox, and those familiar with him and the content of Ecclesiastes will find it no surprise that Ellul declares Ecclesiastes his favorite portion of Scripture. He begins with his regular dose of modesty, that he is utterly unqualified as a scholar to write the book except for having read and prayed over the text for fifty years, and by explaining his scholarly method that proceeds in the opposite direction of virtually all other scholarly work. Ellul carefully refrained from reading anything at all about his subject as he completed his manuscript. After completing it, he read everything he could find. Predictably, "in the end, my reading of dozens of commentaries gave me no reason to change a single line of what I had said" (3). More seriously, Ellul sees the present work as the "final word" to his life work (even though he has written four books since this one), much as he sees *Presence of the Kingdom* as his prolegomena.

Ellul begins introductory critical matters by rejecting what he senses are three erroneous presuppositions in the study of Ecclesiastes: the necessity of formal linear logic that insists on the law of non-contradiction (paradox and dialectic are key for Ellul), a naive and superficial reading of the text that fails to get to its deeper meaning (for Ellul, the text says more than is written; cf. 284), and the opinion that the text is not Hebraic but rather a reflection of another culture or cultures. Just who is Qohelet? Ellul surveys the options, opts for pseudonymity, and throughout the book simply retains the Hebrew transliteration. After a few other text-critical discussions, Ellul looks at the entire text according to three primary themes, each of which forms a single long chapter: themes of vanity (49-127), wisdom (128-212), and God (213-303).

In Qohelet Ellul discovers the "dissenter par excellence" (30), and he revels in finding in the Biblical text themes of vanity that correspond to what he has elsewhere called commonplaces of society, illusory myths by which we live. For example, Qohelet declares that "progress does not exist" (60), exploding the ideological optimism of Marx, de Chardin, our technicians, scientists, et al. But this is hardly cause for fatalism, pessimism, withdrawal, or inactivity (68); quite the contrary, for among his declarations of vanity Qohelet denounces vanity itself (1:2). What about political power (75f)? It

is "vanity, oppression, and foolishness" (84). Money, work, happiness, morality, and human answers all receive like treatment, with the dialectical yes-no spoken to each.

Wisdom is the next prism through which Ellul views the text, and it too, being both praised and damned by Qohelet, results in dialectical vision. It encompasses both knowledge (134-138) and usefulness (138-141). It is at once fragile and impossible. As a uniquely Hebraic revelation, says Ellul, Qohelet's meditation is primarily an attack on Greek philosophy and wisdom; it is an "antiphilosophy" (150, 295). Above all, genuine wisdom demands that we recognize our finiteness, especially that finitude that shows itself in our relation to the future (160-171) and to death (171-185). Ellul goes on to apply these two "pillars of wisdom" to three test cases--the word, possessions, and women and the couple.

In Chapter IV Ellul orients his thoughts about Ecclesiastes around the theme of God, beginning with observations about Qohelet's peculiar use of the word *elohim*. Again, traditional Ellul themes emerge here--a strong polemic against all attempts at religion, metaphysics, ontology, or apologetics; God as Wholly Other; the impossibility of moralizing; the possibility of genuine choice when history is fluid, and the practical determinism or necessity that locks us in if we fail to detect these moments; God as the gracious one who gives gifts (of enjoyment, work, etc.) and who judges (but never condemns); and the identification of obedience with freedom.

As Ellul's declared favorite text and final word, and because of the Scriptural themes throughout Ecclesiastes that bear a distinct dialectical flavor that would justify Ellul's methodology elsewhere (eg: the vanity but necessity of technique), *Reason for Being* will be a good place to enter the Ellulian labyrinth. Those already familiar with him will not find much new here, but rather the same steady convictions that have guided his life and thought, now reaffirmed from the vantage point of Ellul's lifetime of study, prayer, reflection, and incarnated activity.

Into the Darkness: Discipleship in the Sermon on the Mount
by Gene L. Davenport. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988, 302 pp.

Reviewed by Darrell J. Fasching

Into the Darkness is a scriptural commentary in the tradition of Jacques Ellul's *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* or *The Judgment of Jonah*. The challenge of writing in this genre is considerable, for it requires a blending of scriptural exegesis and theological criticism of culture. Therefore *Into the Darkness* is not simply a scriptural exegesis of the Sermon on the Mount, although the author clearly has an excellent command of the historical-critical exegetical nuances of the text. As a theological critique of contemporary culture it is necessarily episodic and unsystematic since contemporary issues are broached as the sequence of issues raised by the text permits. The weakness of this genre lies precisely in the episodic nature of the critique which at times seems "inefficient." But that weakness may well be its strength -- the agenda is not set by the world but by the Gospel.

Will Campbell provides the foreword, reminding the reader that Gene Davenport's understanding of the "cost of discipleship" is not purely academic but has deep roots in his early pastoral days. Campbell relates the story of Davenport's defiance of the complicitous racism of the Klu Klux Klan and the U.S. Secret Service in Alabama in the late fifties. The details of that encounter are spellbinding and should not be skipped over in a rush to the first chapter.

The overarching metaphor of Davenport's exegesis is suggested by its title. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount is "the Light of

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God, which penetrates the Darkness" of our technological world. "The Sermon on the Mount," we are told, "is instruction in those motives, attitudes, perceptions, and habits which are characteristics of God himself and which are the dynamics by which the universe itself, in the New Age under the sovereign rule of God, operates" (17).

The book is divided into nine parts which follow the structure of the Sermon as presented in Matthew. Davenport immediately confronts the most typical objection to the Sermon on the Mount -- that of those ethical realists who remind us that the Sermon's ethic is impossible and impractical in a fallen world. One sees immediately the influence of Ellul upon Davenport as he critiques current realism for its obsession with technical efficiency and efficacy. The technical imperative (i.e., If it can be done it must be done), he tells us, has become a moral imperative. "The final step is to press the ethicists into service. Their role is to justify our desire by developing a rationale and an ideology that will show our actions to be the only moral and most loving course 'under the present circumstances.' Thus it has been with abortion, space exploration, nuclear energy, military weapons, computers, medical developments, 'advances' in education, church management, and so on" (26&27). And so under the guise of an ethic of realism darkness is spread as if it were light. In his critique, Davenport is as hard on the church as he is on the world. The institutional church and media evangelists are both called into question for being far too obsessed with numbers and success. They all too typically rely on the techniques of the world for "peddling the Gospel."

Like Ellul, from whom he has learned much, Davenport has a good deal to say to both the theological liberal and the theological conservative. And like Ellul what he has to say will appeal to both and yet offend both as well. For example:

Excessive biblical literalism is as naive an approach as that which speaks of biblical categories as merely symbolic. . . . If the devil is merely literal, he must be located somewhere, and the opponent is the most logical and convenient place to look. If the devil is merely symbolic, we need not be alert to the danger and possibility that he might pitch his tent in our camp" (35&36).

This is a good book -- which is to say that there is something here to offend and provoke almost everyone. If space permitted I would love to quote Davenport's provocative insights on everything from just war and patriotism to the universality of God's saving love which embraces both those within and outside the church. Ellul and Davenport are truly kindred spirits. My appreciation, however, does not mean that I agree with all of Davenport's views. I find both his critique of Gandhi's non-violent strategies as "spiritual technology" (197) and his views on the alienability of human rights (190) unconvincing. And his distinction between "children of God" and "creatures of God" (106, 201) seems odd -- and at odds with the genealogy in Luke's Gospel which suggests that to be a son of Adam is to be a son of God. Nevertheless, I think Davenport's grasp of the Sermon on the Mount highlights the true "scandal" which the Gospel presents to all realists who seek to explain to Christians why Jesus' Sermon on the Mount cannot be applied in a fallen world.

One of the most consistent habits of the powers and principalities is to convince us that Death is Life, that violence is justice, that power is benevolence, that war is peace. In such a world, whose who are truly sane are automatically perceived by the world as insane. . . . Jesus, the only perfectly sane person who has ever lived, was murdered precisely because he bore witness to reality, and this was viewed by the powers and principalities, quite correctly, as a threat to their own authority to deliver the world over to genuine insanity (43&44).

Let's face it -- the real scandal of the Sermon on the Mount is not that it cannot be applied but that living it requires that one be willing to embrace the way of the cross. (Reviews continued, p. 12)

David Gill has left his position as President and Professor of Christian Ethics at New College Berkeley and is currently at work on two books as well as speaking and consulting, especially in the area of business ethics. He can be reached at: Box 5358 Berkeley CA 94705 (415) 654-5513. Special thanks to Dave for his recent generous contribution to the Forum.

Special thanks to Dan Clendenin for his work as our Book Review Editor. He has done a terrific job. Changes going on in his life have made it necessary to resign that position. Dan has left William Tyndale College to accept a two year appointment with the International Institute for Christian Studies at Moscow State University. Mail addressed to Dan Clendenin, IICS, Box 13157, Overland Park, Kansas 66212 will be forwarded to him. We look forward to getting special reports from Moscow in the future.

Russell Heddendorf has published a new book: *Hidden Threads: Social Thought for Christians* (Richardson TX: Probe Books -- distributed by Word, Inc., Dallas, TX), 1990), 228 pp., 14.95 in paperback. In the tradition of Ellul, this book explores the interface between sociology and Christian faith.

Tony Carnes announces the publication of a new Journal, *Areopagus*. Carnes who is the editor, explains that the focus of the journal is the critique of contemporary forms of idolatry. A one year subscription is \$10.00. Send to: *Areopagus*, King's College, Briarcliff Manor, N.Y., 10510.

Darrell Fasching's new book *Narrative Theology After Auschwitz: From Alienation to Ethics* will be published by Fortress Press during the Winter of 1991-92. The book draws upon the work of Irving Greenberg, Stanley Hauerwas and Jacques Ellul to reconstruct the Augustinian Christian narrative tradition and Luther's two-kingdom ethic in the light of the history of anti-Semitism and murderous bureaucratic technicism which manifest themselves in the Holocaust.

Book Reviewers are needed. If you are willing to review books for the *Forum* please send a copy of your *Curriculum Vitae* and a list of preferred topic areas to Darrell Fasching, c/o the Forum. Also, if you would be interested in being considered for the position of book review editor please indicate this.

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Jacques Ellul As a Theologian For Catholics

Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker of The Next Century -- Therefore Choose Life

by Jeff Dietrich

His breathing came in labored, spasmodic gasps. First the chest would heave a great sigh, then the head would snap back upon the pillow with such force that the jaws popped open automatically, sucking air like a greedy baby. Then came the gurgling sounds. Each hungry breath pushed his face deeper into conformity with the clear plastic oxygen mask that gave him the only sustenance he cared about now.

Any fool could see that Isaiah was dying, but when confronted, the doctors insisted that he was doing fine, and why didn't we all go home and get some sleep. Lots of people had pulled through this. And besides, having eight visitors was against hospital regulations. Their bland professional palliatives stood in marked contrast to our grieving countenances. Isaiah died four hours later.

It is almost impossible for health care professionals to accept the reality of death. In fact, for all the professionals who keep our country running smoothly, the denial of death is essential. As Walter Brueggemann writes in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, "The royal consciousness leads people to numbness, especially to numbness about death. It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring people to engage their experiences of suffering to death."

As Catholic Workers we find ourselves engaged with suffering, despair and death on a daily basis. We believe that this is the authentic reality of the culture, but the message of the culture consistently confirms in powerful ways the very opposite. Until we can understand with some clarity that the "truth of the culture" is grounded in the worship of false gods, we are condemned to a schizophrenic existence.

The theology of Jacques Ellul offers us the prophetic clarity of naming with exquisite perfection the idolatries of contemporary culture. As the late William Stringfellow said, "For Ellul, the affirmation of death is the ultimate reality and hence the ground for immediate moral decision. [He recognizes] an idolatry of death in which all humans and societies are caught up."

Ellul believes that the contemporary manifestation of this idolatry of death lies in our worship of the "sacred ensemble" of techniques. "From the moment that techniques, the state or production are facts, we are required to worship them. . . . This is the very heart of modern religion."

Simply put, technique is the systematic reduction of all human thought, action and organization to the logic and efficiency of the machine. (See *Catholic Agitator*, June 1990.)

The first duty of the Christian, Ellul says, is "to be aware.... At the present time, all so-called progress consists in developing this technical framework of our civilization. All parties, whether revolutionary or conservative, liberal or socialist, of the right or left, agree to preserve these fundamental phenomena: the primacy of produc-

tion, the continual growth of the state, the autonomous development of technique."

This situation is monstrous because it amounts to the virtual enslavement of humanity to the principalities and powers—the spiritual force of evil in the world. If we are not "awake and aware," we will enthusiastically cooperate with this demonic power. "If we let ourself drift along the stream of history, without knowing it, we will have chosen the power of suicide, which is at the heart of the world. . . . We cannot have many illusions."

To the extent that our actions are founded upon the mythology of the contemporary reality, rather than the word of God, we reinforce this demonic direction. The mythology of progress, revolution and youth are the foundation of all our cultural ideologies. All of the motivating forces of the culture, from advertising copy to political propaganda, to the idealization of humanitarian impulses in medicine, education and public service are founded upon these false mythologies.

We cannot fight the world of power and technique, more and greater power and technique. Our situation is not unlike the Allied forces of World War II fighting the demonic forces of Nazism with the same tactics as Hitler: mass bombings, propaganda and terrorism of civilian populations. They won the physical war, but the demonic spirituality of Hitlerism triumphed in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent willingness of U.S. foreign policy to transform the entire globe into a nuclear concentration camp.

God does not work through "technical means." Most contemporary Christians, especially Catholics, have an unconscious Chardian theology. Teilhard de Chardin was the Jesuit paleontologist who believed that technology was an extension of natural biological evolution, and that as it developed and became more sophisticated, so too would human culture and human consciousness. This process would eventually lead to the encirclement of the entire globe by "noosphere," a cloud of higher consciousness culminating in the second coming of Christ.

But this view of culture and technology is, if not blasphemous, anti-scriptural. Any overview of the Hebrew-Christian Scripture would clarify that, except in rare cases, God only works through human beings. The Holy Spirit does not work through the electoral process, through war, revolution, scientific progress or the space program. Neither does the Holy Spirit work through mass movements, political reform or institutions. The Holy Spirit only works through people.

We cannot use the means of the world to bring in God's Kingdom of peace and justice. We cannot *bring in* peace and justice, says Ellul, we can only *be* peace and justice. The Christian must be "the leaven in the loaf," "the light in the darkness," "the sheep among wolves." In other words, if we want the Kingdom of God to be a reality, then we must use the "means of the Kingdom" to achieve that end. If we "seek first God's Kingdom and righteousness," then all the other things, like peace, justice, sisterhood and brotherhood "will be added unto us."

Ellul's theological perspective radically liberates us from having to be successful, from having to respond to the false challenge of either violent revolution or liberal reform with which means the

world is constantly seducing us. Now we don't have to kill all of the capitalists, nor do we have to go to graduate school to get an MSW, nor do we have to become a non-profit corporation and raise millions of dollars or make millions of converts. In short, we don't have to be effective!

We have been liberated to be the means of God, a channel for the Holy Spirit to act in the world. But this does not mean that we can just *be*, it means that we must be engaged with the suffering reality of the world, the sinfulness of the world, the injustice of the world. We must be present in the places of darkness, manifesting the Kingdom, opening a channel for the Holy Spirit to come into the world.

This is the essence of the "tension" that Ellul talks about. As Christian realists, we must be engaged with a sinful world, but aware that it is not possible for us to do anything about it. Our situation is not unlike the women who stayed with Jesus at the foot of the cross. Their love was stronger than their illusions, unlike the male disciples who had expected to become regional administrators in the new "Jesus corporation," the women had a more authentic orientation, and thus remained faithful to the end.

We live in a crucified world. We cannot make it uncrucified any more than the women could rescue Jesus from his cross. But, like the women, we will not abandon that suffering reality. The response of the women was to mourn and to grieve, to enter into the darkness of suffering.

We picked up Isaiah's body at the coroner's office and brought him to our house. We sat with him throughout the night, watching and praying. In the morning we put him in the old blue van and drove him over to Dolores Mission for the funeral. Finally, we buried him in a plot at the back corner of Sacred Heart Cemetery. We grieved the dying of a friend. We grieved the injustice that only in death could this homeless man finally have a home. We grieved the dying of a culture that numbs itself to the pain of the poor, and blinds itself to the reality of death.

Brueggemann says that "anguish is the door to historical existence, that only those who embrace the reality of death will receive new life." We believe that the denial of death and the subsequent narcissism that causes our insatiable consumption of products and experiences defines the essence of contemporary culture.

As Christopher Lasch says in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, "There is a growing despair of the changing society, even of understanding it.... Industrial civilization gives rise to a philosophy of futility, a pervasive fatigue, a disappointment with achievements that finds an outlet in changing the more superficial things.... It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life, and proposes consumption as a cure."

But we refuse to take the cure. Trivial entertainments, superficial relationships and compulsive shopping are not the cure; they merely address the symptoms of our schizophrenic condition. We seek unitive wholeness and with Brueggemann we recognize "that all satiation is an eating of self to death." We refuse to be numb and narcotized—the prophetic call is to be aware and awake. We will not worship at the altar of the false god of technique. We will not accept the bland palliatives of the technocratic priesthood. When we encounter suffering, we will mourn. We will respond with compassionate engagement. Wholeness comes when we refuse any longer to deny death. Wholeness comes when we respond to the Word of God which calls us out of the bondage of death and oppression of life and liberation. In the words of Deuteronomy: "I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Jacques Ellul: A Catholic Worker Vision of the Culture

by Katharine Temple

About twenty years ago, in my first flush of enthusiasm at "discovering" the work of Jacques Ellul, someone came up to me and said, "I am surprised you're taken up with such a depressing thinker. How can you bear to read him, let alone find him helpful?" I was a bit taken aback. Still, it has to be admitted that M. Ellul is not widely read; even when he is respected, he is kept somewhat at arm's length. There is no such thing as an "Ellul school" emerging and no sweep of Ellul-ism to attract attention. Nor does M. Ellul himself seek to inspire a following of devotees. The net result, as far as I can see, is that his insights have been dismissed far too lightly.

It is always hard to know for sure how you arrive anywhere, but at the outset, I picked up *The Technological Society* because of a desire to know more about what makes our society tick. And also I was feeling rather jaded about the social analyses around me. Although disconcertingly massive, this masterpiece in no way dispirited me. On the contrary, it brought into focus my gut reactions to a whole host of things—trends that made me distinctly uneasy, despite the more popular Western view that ours is the best of all possible worlds, or the even more socially aware sentiment that things are wretched but inevitably going to get better. The very starkness of the book was bracing in that it gave me a toe-hold to articulate what was actually going on around me. Because he was refreshingly accurate, words like "depressing" or "pessimistic" seemed quite beside the point. He helped to unveil the world for me. As George Grant, a Canadian political philosopher, has written:

He [Ellul] does not write of necessity to scare men, but to make them free. I am certainly freer for having read this book.... Keats put perfectly my response to this book. "Then felt I like some watcher of skies/When a new planet swims into his ken." Not to have read this book is to choose to remain socially myopic when somebody offers you free the proper spectacles.

The Technological Society is not a theological book, so for some time I had no idea that Ellul is also a biblical scholar, and I can't say that I really cared. While I had not exactly fallen away from faith, I was decidedly wishy-washy and nothing much in the field of theology grabbed me. It was all in abeyance, on the back burner, as I turned to other matters. Almost by chance, I happened upon M. Ellul's *Violence* and picked it up because it looked a lot shorter than *The Technological Society*. It turned out to be the first work of non-fiction that ever kept me up all night.

Although reading *Violence* was not a "conversion experience," it was an illumination that Christianity could make a unique difference and theology has a cutting edge. It made me want to read the Bible again in a new way and to enter the fray again as a Christian. In thinking about the impact of this book, I am reminded of what M. Ellul has said about Karl Barth's influence on him. "Barth went beyond the orthodox-liberal controversy." What's more, this possibility came to me in the same way he found it in Karl Barth.

First I discovered through him a flexible understanding of Scripture. Barth was infinitely less systematic than Calvin, and he was completely existential at a time when this concept did not exist. He put biblical thought in direct contact with actual experience; it wasn't arm-chair theology.

Over the years it has been Ellul's ongoing clarity about the world and his loyalty to the Bible, through thick and thin, that have most deeply impressed me. In person, his qualities of sanity, constancy, and attentiveness are very much in evidence, personal traits that also come through in his semi-autobiographical *In Season, Out of Season*

(1982). To this day, it still comes as a mild surprise when some Christians find him too negative for words.

Quite a few people object less to his descriptions than to his refusal to "give the right answer at the back of the book." Since Ellul has never suffered from a failure of nerve or personal aloofness, the most important thing is to understand *why* he rejects the role of guru.

[W]e learned that the Bible is not a collection of answers God has given to our questions; on the contrary, it is the place where God addresses us, where He asks us the question we have to answer. To hear the word of God is to hear the question which God asks of me, to which I must give a response out of my life and faith. I am made responsible (compelled to give a response). Thus when this all-powerful God speaks, He does not annihilate us, but renders us answerable.

Within this perspective, there's no game-plan to be imposed. The answers have to be worked out and re-worked again and again, always concretely and provisionally, by the faithful, within the scope of biblical freedom.

As Jean Bosc, Barth's most loyal disciple said, "One can be so much more flexible and open to all things when one has a central theological certainty." Barth also brought me a freedom with regard to the biblical text--the only and unique pillar of the revelation of God, of course, but thanks to which God speaks in a multiple and diverse manner, allowing us to mine the multiple riches from this unique treasure.

His intention is to shake us from our lethargy, to direct Christian attention to a path that is really neither fundamentalist nor liberal nor mystical. He follows a different route and resists the temptation to offer conclusions that might short-circuit our own engagement with the Bible.

In all of this, I think it would be misleading to suggest that Ellul has kept total silence on immediately practical questions or that he has had no influence in this regard. In my case, prolonged exposure to his biblical studies, his persistent questions, his espousal of something other than the *status quo*, has left its mark.

One major difference he's made in my life comes from his deep attachment to the Hebrew Scriptures. His studies of the early chapters of Genesis, Jonah (*The Judgment of Jonah*, 1971), and his reflections on such neglected books as II Kings (*The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 1972), for instance, are unique in contemporary biblical commentary. By accepting that Hebrew Scripture as being fully the Word of God, Ellul has managed to avoid the teachings of contempt and the damage inflicted by historical criticism. As soon as I tried to pursue this kind of study further, I found myself a bit unsure about where to go next, so I asked him directly for help. He suggested that Christians do well to learn from the great teachers in the Jewish tradition, if our own understanding of Scripture is not going to shrivel up. I took his advice seriously, and now learn Hebrew Bible from the rabbis who have revered it most as *the* guide for life. From them, I am beginning to get intimations about what he calls the "multiple riches," and so to see new depths to the question, "What is to be done?"

M. Ellul also quite indirectly helped me become open to the Catholic Worker movement, founded in 1933 by the peasant-worker-scholar Peter Maurin. It may sound odd to claim that an arch-Protestant pushed me toward a group with arch-Roman Catholic origins, and it is true that the links are not strictly linear. Although both are French, the differences between Ellul and Maurin--differences that go back to the original split between the two traditions over matters such as tradition itself, philosophy, Christendom, agrarianism, the sacraments--seem massive; and yet I am convinced that what binds that two men together is stronger than whatever separates them. Each has turned against the tide to develop critical analyses that move us beyond ideologies and state power; each is

rooted in a Christianity that pre-dates confidence in "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"; each has understood the Christian response as one of personalism, self-sacrifice, poverty, the daily works of mercy; each is a Christian intellectual in the true sense.

But Peter Maurin had a co-founder in the Catholic Worker--Dorothy Day. Inspiration took root at their meeting. In one of his "Easy Essays," Peter said, "Man proposes and woman disposes." Whatever else we may think of this aphorism, it aptly describes what happened in their case, for Dorothy always called Peter her mentor.

Peter's idea of hospices seemed like a simple and logical one to me; hospices such as they had in the Middle Ages are certainly very much needed today. But I like even better his talk about personal responsibility. He quoted St. Jerome, that every house should have a "Christ's room" for our brother who is in need.... Peter brought up the idea of the paper the first time I met him and he kept harping on it, day after day. He told me I needed a Catholic background, and he came day after day with books and papers and digests of articles which he either read aloud or left with me to read. It was impossible to be with a person like Peter without sharing his simple faith that the Lord would provide what was necessary to do His work.

She was the ideal student, who absorbed his synthesis and then put the ideas into practice. Throughout her books and columns in *The Catholic Worker*, she passed along the vision she had received from Peter, by writing about the daily attempts to live it. When a friend gave me a subscription to the paper, my thought was, "Whether she has heard of him or not, this is the kind of thing Ellul is talking about. This is one answer as to what you can do when you get up in the morning."

Born Again Catholic Workers A Conversation Between Jeff Dietrich and Katharine Temple

This conversation . . . was conducted by phone in May of this year [1990]. Kassie has lived and worked at the New York Catholic Worker for the last 15 years. She is an editor of the Catholic Worker newspaper, and has been an avid Ellul scholar for over 20 years. We are grateful for her advice and encouragement in our efforts to understand and apply Ellul's thoughts to the Worker movement. For us, Kassie best embodies the highest qualities of Peter Maurin's worker/scholar tradition.

JEFF DIETRICH: I talked to you a while back, and I told you how excited I was about the reading I have been doing in Jacques Ellul. I feel like a born-again Catholic Worker, if one can say that. I feel that what Jacques Ellul has done is to give us a consistent, contemporary critique of the culture in which we live, which makes what the Catholic Worker does so pertinent. I feel like sometimes people just dismiss us as "saints" or just nice people. Folks say, "Oh, you do such nice work;" "You're such good people." That's not why we're doing it. We want to be prophetic. We want to do it as a prophetic criticism of the culture.

To have someone like Ellul, who gives you this elaborate perspective to work from, I feel liberated by this perspective, which I know some people find rather depressing.

KATHARINE TEMPLE: We have discussed this, and I was thinking as you were talking that I knew some of the writings of Jacques Ellul before I knew much about the Catholic Worker, and I was very taken with his analysis of the society and his other writings about what it means to be Christian in the world in which we live. And as I learned more about the Catholic Worker (this was before

I came) it seemed like the philosophy and the theology of the Catholic Worker was the only movement that seemed to resonate with this same kind of understanding.

In some ways, I came to the Catholic Worker via the writings of Jacques Ellul. Our two comings to see the relationship between the Catholic Worker and Jacques Ellul are from different times, but I think the same relationship is there.

JEFF: I feel like as a Catholic Worker movement, we really haven't updated our analysis of the culture since Peter [Maurin] died. And the way Ellul talks about the technological society, I feel as though Peter Maurin, if he were alive today, would either be saying the same thing or writing "Easy Essays" about Jacques Ellul. What do you think?

KATHARINE: Well, I think that's very true. I think they come out of the same culture. They were both born in France. Peter, of course is older, but in terms of the environment for social analysis, they both did come out of the same intellectual and social world.

JEFF: What are some of those similar influences?

KATHARINE: First of all, they both come out of the first part of the twentieth century. There was the impact of the industrial revolution in France and that realm of social thought that began to question if this has brought about the benefits that people were certain it was going to bring about.

The intellectual ferment in France at that time was very strong and very rigorous. Also, although Ellul is a Protestant and Peter Maurin was Roman Catholic, the world of Christian thought in France at that time was minority thinking. Nonetheless, some very strong critiques of what was happening as a result of the industrial revolution from a Christian perspective were very active at that time.

Of course, Peter came out of a peasant background, and I think the evils or the dark side of the industrial revolution seemed to strike him from the very beginning. Whereas, Ellul's parents were immigrants, and he was brought up on the docks of Bordeaux, and grew up in the urbanized world of France. So he came directly with the workers' struggles and directly in contact with Karl Marx. Peter came out of an entirely earlier culture.

I think what is needed to be done in terms of a social analysis focusing on the problems of the world would be one which they would share as a requirement for social thought. I think Ellul would see Peter Maurin's thought as focusing directly on industrial society and what it has become and what it has done to people. Ellul, on the other hand, has focused since 1935 on what he calls "the question of technique." His thought is that industrial society has moved to a different phase. The ways and means of the machine age have passed on to a different stage, thus your analysis would be different.

JEFF: What I thought was so validating is that in reading Ellul I felt supported in what the Catholic Worker does in simple living, the green revolution.

Ellul makes this contrast between the "means of God"--that God can only work through human beings, that God very rarely works directly in the world, that God most often chooses a human medium through which to work. And that God cannot work through the technical means of the world. That the more our culture becomes enslaved to technical means, the more difficult it is for God to work in the world.

Also there are all those metaphors from the Gospels that are so important to Ellul--to be the leaven in the loaf, to be a light unto the world, to be wakeful and watching, the pearl of great price. All of these things are the "little way" of the Catholic Worker.

You often feel overwhelmed by the means of the world. I know I've always had a tendency to buy into that perspective of "We're not

being very effective here." So you stick with the Catholic Worker way -- out of a kind of faithful, spiritual perspective.

What Ellul does is give you the ability to look critically at what the technical means are and say, "No, you can't use these to bring about the Kingdom of God." You can't use mass elections to bring about the Kingdom of God, you can't use television and radio to bring about the Kingdom. TV evangelists are not doing the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not working through technical means. Each person has to have a conversion of the heart and be open to the word of God, and be ready to be used by the Holy Spirit. That's the only way it works and none of us want to believe that.

KATHARINE: That's a very clear summary of what Ellul is saying to Christians, and I think it's a very clear summary, perhaps in a different language, of what Peter and Dorothy would have been saying. That is the call to all Christians, not just a select few, that we are all called to witness to the way of God, the truth of God, which is different from the powers of the world. But they would both say very specifically that we need to do it in the world in which we live, and know that world. You can't be a light about (sic) a society that was a hundred years ago and not take into account what is going on now, what it is that is enslaving us now.

Sometimes Peter wouldn't use that language, but when Peter talked about voluntary poverty, for example, not only is that a very traditional means or root of Catholic thought, but he was talking to a society that is dominated by money -- money is enslaving people. The weight of consumerism is literally killing people, and the Christian is called to open that up and liberate people from that force.

And that the means and ends, and this is a theme that both Ellul and Peter have very much in common: Is the means and end? If you want a society that is personalist, communitarian, based on the well-being of the other, you can't reach that through impersonal, bureaucratic fund-raising means. Dorothy used to say, "All the way to heaven is heaven," which is another statement of the "little way" or the question of ends and means.

Since the "efficient" means of having spectacular results on a large scale quickly is a dominant mode of this society, it is even more important to be cognizant of the fact that if you are going to have a society where it is easier to be good or have some sort of cell in the old society, you're going to have to use different means than those that prevail around us.

JEFF: And this is exactly why the Catholic Worker espouses an anarchist, non-stateist perspective. But again, there hasn't been a strong intellectual groundwork or foundation for an anarchist perspective, and we all get sucked into the cultural ritual of elections and the media surrounding it.

KATHARINE: We've certainly had many discussions around here about whether people prefer the word personalist or anarchist, which in one understanding can be seen as the same. But I think the importance of the anarchist critique, and certainly in social theory Ellul gives an anarchist critique of technological society, in distinction to a Marxist critique or a liberal critique, is that the form of anarchism that the Catholic Worker would espouse would be a personalist anarchism. It is precisely a critique of stateism--that the increasing power of the state is the source of domination and that in our relationship to the state we need to be cognizant that it isn't one entity among many, so you can say, well, we'll take the advantages from the state that we can and it won't have any repercussions on how we run our house. Rather, the state is a key point in our analysis of this society to see where the increasingly monolithic power structure is.

JEFF: I was particularly taken with Ellul's introduction in his book *The Political Illusion* where he talks about the French Revolu-

lution. We tend to think of kings of France as being absolute, total monarchs, the "Sun King" and all that. Before the French Revolution, the king had difficulty creating a standing army, he couldn't raise enough taxes to support a drive for empire. But after the Revolution, once the king was deposed and all people became part of the state and responsible for the state and to the state, then everybody, of course, served willingly. Then, once so-called democracy was there, people voluntarily enslaved themselves and gave themselves over to a taxation system and a system of law that they would never have done under a monarchy.

When you start looking at it that way, the whole idea of people just giving themselves over completely to the state, you need to have a stronger foundation to this anarchist-personalist perspective. I think that's what Ellul gives us.

KATHARINE: Yes, at the end of that book, he talks about what is needed, and these are just a few little excerpts from that:

It is important above all, never to permit oneself to ask the state to help us. Indeed we must try to create positions in which we reject and struggle with the state, not in order to modify some element of the regime or force it to make some decision, but much more fundamentally, in order to permit the emergence of social, political, intellectual, artistic bodies, associations, interest groups or economic or Christian groups totally independent of the state. What is needed are groups capable of extreme diversification of the entire society's fundamental tendencies, capable of escaping the unitary structure, presenting themselves not as negations of the state, which would be absurd, but as *something else* not under the state's tutelage.

JEFF: He would say that the United States should not be patting itself on the back and saying we finally succeeded in winning the Cold War, and that the same kind of liberty and freedom that the United States has is just about to prevail throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

KATHARINE: I think Ellul would agree with Peter and Dorothy, particularly Dorothy, who focused on the state and the large bureaucratic institutions. But he would say that the thinking is still too much in terms of the Marxist "mode of production." The mode of production has changed in the Catholic Worker analysis, even though Dorothy had the insight that we need to better coordinate and describe it in a way that is more exact.

For instance, the role of the computer isn't simply shunned because Peter didn't like machines, but the computer is something quite different from other machines, and that's what we should be looking to.

JEFF: It seems to me that Ellul, in *The Technological System*, is saying that the computer as an information processor created a completely different environment. Previous to the computer, the techniques of the state, education, propaganda and various other techniques were separate and could not be coordinated. But now, they can be smoothly integrated into one smooth-running technical system through the information processing machine.

KATHARINE: Right. And we need to analyze that, not moving away from our philosophy of what that is doing to people, how it is creating poverty. This would not say that there is no poverty or that the whole emphasis on the works of mercy would change, but in our analysis of where is the enslavement coming, where is the oppression. What's worse is that all of these things look good and they look like they're overcoming the oppression of the industrial era.

JEFF: It looks like they're liberating people, and people speak of . . . machines -- satellite communications and information processing, as personalized, liberating machines.

KATHARINE: And I think what Ellul would say is that you really need to look at how precisely the poverty in Los Angeles, the poverty in New York, the people who come to our doors--how is this being shaped and formed, what is this doing to people.

JEFF: To me, that is exactly the power of the Catholic Worker--to be there with the poor, particularly the poor of the urban First World, the urban, technical world, to see how their lives have been completely destroyed. All cultural supports are gone. All traditional culture has been erased. You can see it much more clearly in the poor than you can in the wealthier classes, who are much more able to protect themselves against the disintegration, or at least to hide it.

The wealthy still operate on these traditional values and perspectives. But among the poorest of the poor you recognize the decimation of their lives by technology's destruction of traditional values. You realize the hypocrisy of American politicians, all politicians, who preach family values with one breath, and preach technological growth with the next, and don't recognize that the two are incompatible.

KATHARINE: And they don't recognize that this new formulation of the information society, or the technical society is depersonalizing. You can't use impersonal means to bring about a more personalist way of being.

Also, you can't be liberated from the power of money simply by spending more money. Peter said you go into voluntary poverty to end the enslavement to money. I'm not sure if "voluntary poverty" is the phrase that Ellul has used, but he would say if this society is defined, say, by massive consumerism and the prestige of money, that certainly should be questioned. If large-scale bureaucracies are the order of the day, then we need small communities of personalist, non-bureaucratic ways of living our lives together.

JEFF: The whole issue of personalism. It seems when we go out and talk about it or when we write about it in our paper, I feel self-conscious almost because it seems like this quaint kind of perspective of the world, and what we really should be doing is having a massive revolution, or electing Jesse Jackson president or converting the editorial board of the L. A. Times. That this personalist perspective of person-to-person action, doing the works of mercy--that's a nice thing to do, and if you want to do it, that's fine, but those of us who are really going to make a difference in the world and bring social justice about, or bring in the Kingdom, we're going to work through these massive means to change the world.

I feel so much that Ellul gives me a way of looking critically at these technological means and saying no, they're not going to work, that's not going to bring about the kind of justice that you want. In fact, these technological means are doing exactly the opposite of what you think they're doing. Fortunately, or unfortunately, you have to work on this personal level.

KATHARINE: I think of the reasons why we sometimes espouse a philosophy of personalism that seems so quaint is that it can be seen that this world we live in is so overwhelming that we're going to retreat into a world of ones and twos. I'm going to look after my own personal well-being, I'm going to try to create this atmosphere where my person is affirmed.

But that certainly isn't what was meant by personalism, certainly not by Dorothy or Peter, in that it is a public response in the world. This isn't just getting a house and retreating into it because we have to have some other people living with us. But rather, this is a statement that other people live together better in small personalist ways than through bureaucratic ways.

Jacques Ellul And Thomas Merton On Technique

by Gene L. Davenport

As anyone who has read much of Jacques Ellul knows, there is a problem with the use of the English term *technology* to translate both French terms *la technique* and *la technologie*. From my very first contact with Ellul's writing, it has seemed to me unfortunate that English translators have not used *technique* for *la technique*, since the definition of *technique* is essentially a method or procedure by which artistic, scientific, or mechanical processes are carried out. Certainly, it still would be necessary to explain the specific twists that Ellul gives the term, but that would not be nearly as problematic as overcoming the connotation of *technology* as the use of machines or the application of science. Moreover, Ellul himself has recently emphasized *la technologie* as discourse about *la technique* (*The Technological Bluff*)—a definition that he pointed out several years ago—and also has indicated his own disappointment that English translators have not used *technique* for their translations. For this essay, therefore, I have chosen to use *technique*, rather than the commonly used *technology* to refer to what Ellul calls *la technique*. And now to the subject at hand, a comparison of Ellul and Thomas Merton on technique.

Thomas Merton was a monk in the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, an order commonly known as the Trappists, in Gethsemani, Kentucky. He entered the order in December, 1941, and for the next twenty-seven years wrote prolifically about a wide range of topics. The areas to which he most frequently turned were monastic life and spirituality, social issues, and Asian approaches to spirituality.

Although I do not recall any references to Merton in Ellul's writings, in a letter to Marco Pallis, Merton enthusiastically recommended *The Technological Society*; and in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* he reflected extensively on propaganda in light of Ellul's writing on the subject.

Whereas Ellul has deliberately and consistently (with the possible exception of *The Humiliation of the Word*) kept his sociological analyses and his theological reflections separate, for Merton social criticism was an exercise in theological criticism. On the other hand, to assume that Ellul's social criticism is completely independent of his theological perspective would be to assume a dualism hardly acceptable from the standpoint of either theology or contemporary psychology.

Despite their differences in religious or theological perspectives, Ellul and Merton are strikingly similar in their perception of technique and of technique's hold on the world. The basic definition of technique in Ellul's work was spelled out in *The Technological Society* and has remained basic for all his succeeding writings: "*Technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.*" In his elaboration of this definition Ellul lists the characteristics of techniques as automatism, self-augmentation (self-directing and irreversible in progress), monism (the unity of technique, efficiently ordered by one principle), inclination to linkage with other techniques, necessity, and autonomy (*The Technological Society*, pp. 79-147).

Merton never defines technology, but his few comments on Ellul indicate that he basically accepted Ellul's definition.

At the heart of technique for both Ellul and Merton is the drive for an efficiency that has no place for spontaneity or individual initiative. Consequently, the society of technique becomes a concen-

tration camp to which each inmate must become pleasantly adjusted, convinced of the desirability of the way things are.

That Merton's analysis of contemporary western society was, to some extent at least, stimulated by Ellul's writing is indicated in a letter from Merton to Father Bernard Haring, a peritus at the Second Vatican Council. Merton tells Haring that in his opinion the preparatory draft on the Church in the Modern World needed to rest on a "deeper realization of the urgent problems posed by technology today," and he suggests that the Council fathers should read Ellul's *Technological Society*. Merton goes on to portray technology as a massive complex that reaches every aspect of social life, a complex of which no one really is in control and which "dictates its own solutions irrespective of human needs or even of reason." Technology, Merton says, "has reasons entirely of its own which do not necessarily take into account the needs of man." The human race does not command this complex, says Merton, but serves it. Technology, he fears, is "geared for the systematic destruction of the natural world, quite apart from the question of the 'bomb' which, in fact, is only one rather acute symptom of the whole disease (*The Hidden Ground of Love*, 383).

Merton is describing here, of course, those characteristics of technique to which Ellul refers in terms of automatism, self-augmentation, necessity, and autonomy. Technique becomes its own self-willing, self-driving master. But even if his view was stimulated by Ellul's writing, Merton did not merely parrot those writings. Rather Merton went on to his own reflections, informed by, but not prisoner to, Ellul's point of view. This may be seen in Merton's chilling picture of efficiency in the poem "Chant To Be Used In Processions Around A Site With Furnaces." The speaker in the poem describes the highly efficient way in which gas chambers were prepared for victims and the victims were prepared for the chambers. The speaker boasts of having "purified" and remaining decent through it all; of having improved the chambers, guaranteeing them and providing portholes through which one could look; and of having made soap according to a very precise recipe—though fat was hard to find.

The poem closes with two self-justifying lines:

*In my day we worked hard we saw what we did
our self-sacrifice was conscientious and
complete our work was faultless and detailed*

*Do not think yourself better because you
burn up friends and enemies with long
range missiles without ever seeing what you
have done.*

(*Select Poems of Thomas Merton*, 118-121)

In this poem Merton portrays both the efficiency of the system and the loss of human identity by the one who carries out the work of the system. The dehumanization of the actor is conveyed in the very way the lines are written—without punctuation of any sort (excepting the period at the end of the last line) and without line arrangements indicating a rhythm. To read the poem as Merton has written it calls for an emotionless, arrhythmic monotone such as one might hear from a computerized synthetic voice.

For both Ellul and Merton an essential tool of the society of technique is propaganda, a tool that is primary in the forced adjustment of the individual to the society. The purpose of propaganda, says Ellul, is not to change opinions, but to change actions or inaction.

In a series of reflections on propaganda in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, Merton discusses propaganda as an "appeal to reason and

to action which is in fact essentially *irrational*...(though) not necessarily untrue" (*Conjectures*, 236). The most effective propaganda, says Merton, is "that which makes use of strictly true facts, but facts which do not mean what the propagandist claims they mean and which, in reality, mean nothing whatever."

In "A Letter to a Southern Churchman" (*Faith and Violence*, 145-164) Merton takes propaganda in his own direction as he reflects on what he calls *pseudo-events*. Pseudo-events are facts and situations that either are not especially significant or are given false or misleading significance. These pseudo-events are heaped upon us by newspapers, radio, and television, and they convince us that because we have absorbed them, we understand the world.

Merton associates the clamor of pseudo-events, or manufactured events, with the powers and principalities to which the Apostle Paul refers. Paul's view of the "elements" and "powers of the air," says Merton, was couched in the language of the cosmology of his day. Today, he says, these powers are to be sought "not in what is remote and mysterious, but in what is...at our elbow all day long--what speaks or sings in our ear, and practically does our thinking for us." The powers today "dominate us in the confusion and ambiguity of the Babel of tongues that we call mass-society."

Merton's own effort to thwart the lure of pseudo-events was to ignore the "news" until it was stale. He did not pretend that by not keeping up with the news he was free from it, but he refrained from trying to know events in their fresh condition as "news." He got his "news" more through books and magazines. "To 'fall behind' in this sense," he wrote, "is to get out of the big cloud of dust that everybody is kicking up, to breathe and to see a little more clearly."

Ellul sounds a similar note when he speaks of persons being deluged with facts they cannot assimilate, getting impressions rather than understanding, and coming to the conclusion that *those who know all this* have come to certain conclusions that are the right ones. We live, says Ellul, in a labyrinth of information, in which information is abundant, but one doesn't have a choice. As Merton puts it, propaganda exerts violence over us. By means of apparent truth and apparent reason propaganda induces us to surrender our freedom and self-possession. We like to have others make decisions for us while we assume that we have decided.

Merton began the letter by saying that he had decided no longer to comment on public events. He seems, in his explanation of his decision, to have been resisting any efforts by well-meaning "disciples" to rely upon him in a way that would make him an unwilling source of propaganda. "When one has too many answers," he wrote, "and when one joins in a chorus of others chanting the same slogans, there is, it seems to me, a danger that one is trying to evade the loneliness of conscience that realizes itself to be in an inescapably evil situation." The effect of this chorus of sameness, of course, is the same as that of propaganda.

The result of propaganda in the society of technique, according to both Ellul and Merton, is the loss of identity and, consequently, of freedom. This loss is demanded by the society of technique and is the very purpose of propaganda. "No technique is possible when men are free," writes Ellul (*Technological Society*, 138). Technique requires predictability and, no less, exactness of prediction. It must reduce us to technical animals. Consequently, technique "eliminates all uninhabited places, leaving no place for the would-be solitary.... It is vain to aspire to live alone when one is obliged to participate in all collective phenomena and to use all the collective's tools, without which it is impossible to earn a bare subsistence.... He who maintains that he can escape it is either a hypocrite or unconscious" (*Technological Society*, 139-140).

Merton, who commonly refers to the monastic life as the solitary life, or the life of solitude, does not disagree with Ellul on this

pervasiveness of technique. For example, Merton consistently warned that the person who entered the monastery thinking thereby to escape the world completely misunderstood the monastic life. He pointed out that the monastery is a way of living in the world and that the world invades the monastery. The purpose of the monastery is to provide, for those who have the vocation for the monastic life, a place to recover his or her individuality by being drawn closer to God.

In one of his best essays Merton portrays this invasion of the world in a simple, almost charming way. In "Rain and the Rhinoceros" he describes a rainy night at the monastery. He had plodded through the mud up to the small cabin which had become his living quarters in the last years of his life and had cooked some oatmeal on a Coleman stove. "Let me say this," he wrote, "before rain becomes a utility that they can plan and distribute for money. By 'they' I mean the people who cannot understand that rain is a festival, who do not appreciate its gratuity, who think that what has no price has no value.... At the moment it is still free, and I am in it. I celebrate its gratuity and its meaninglessness" (*Raids on the Un-speakable*).

Merton reflects on the rhythm of the rain on the roof of the cabin, rhythms not yet controlled by the engineers, he speaks of the difference between his rain and the rain of the city, and he reflects on Thoreau. But then he points out that he doesn't really see himself as escaping anything. "Technology," he says, "is here, even in the cabin. True, the utility line is not here yet, and so G.E. is not here yet either. (Note: there *were* utility lines to various parts of the monastery grounds.) When the utilities and G.E. enter my cabin arm in arm it will be nobody's fault but my own. I admit it. I am not kidding anybody, even myself. I will suffer their bluff and patronizing complacencies in silence." Then, reflecting back on comments made earlier about the words on the box for his Coleman lantern--*Stretches days to have more fun*--he says, "I will let them think they know what I am doing here. They are convinced *I am having fun* (*Raids*...., 13).

For Merton, the solitary, contemplative life not only should draw one closer to God, but should enable one--precisely by being drawn closer to God--to have a clearer picture of the world on whose behalf the solitary one lives out his or her life. Merton undoubtedly would agree with Ellul that one does not escape politics by being non-political and that becoming apolitical is in itself a political decision. Ellul himself has said that the private life must be reinvented (*The Political Illusion*, 205), and though it is not clear that Ellul would agree that the monastic life is the proper, or realistic, way to reinvent it, for Merton the monastic life offers one of the best, if not the best, opportunities to do so. It enables, Merton would say, precisely the kind of different perspective that Ellul sees as necessary. The automatism of technique requires the complicity of human beings robbed of a different perspective, robbed of all sense of private life and individual identity. For Merton, these are regained in being drawn to God, the life of solitude offers the setting for this to occur.

In *Perspectives on Our Age* Ellul points out that technique reduces Christianity to the inner life, to spirituality, to the salvation of the soul" (*Perspectives*, 98), as well as penetrating Christianity in the forms of propaganda, advertising, and Structuralism as a method of biblical study (100-101). The church, therefore, becomes just another tool of technique, just another instrument to bring about human adjustment to the system. Merton was well aware that the monastic life can become victim of this capture by technique if the rule becomes a way of ordering life from without and does not lead to inner recovery. As pointed out earlier, he was well aware of the presence of the world within the monastery. He saw both the

value of continual reform of the monastic life and the danger that technique could garb itself in the cloak of reform.

Although both Ellul and Merton's writings deal at length with the problems and dangers of technique, neither wishes to be classified as anti-technique. Ellul is more explicit in the positive dimension of his view, seeing technique as something that God can use and something that God alone can judge. What we can and must do, says Ellul, is subject technique to the Revelation in Jesus Christ, thereby destroying the deified, religious character of technique (*Perspectives*, 108). We should not expect to defeat technique, he says, but meet its challenge just as human beings have met all other challenges and transcended them.

Successfully meeting the challenge, says Ellul, requires "something transcendent" (*Perspectives*, 101). We must receive a freedom that comes from outside the system, something not given in technique, and live as bearers of Hope--Hope that comes from outside technique--and bearers of freedom, bringing free play into the midst of every situation. Being bearers of freedom, however, also is possible only when we have received freedom from outside the system of technique. What is required is *mutants*, persons who can use techniques and not be used by those techniques. We need people who are *in* but *against* technique--which, Ellul admits, is a delicate balance. Ellul does not mean that only Christians can overcome technique, though he does think that the Christian Revelation--not to be confused with the church--is the unique event in which God's reconciliation of the world--and consequently of technique--is accomplished.

Merton sees, as one might expect a Roman Catholic to see, the new creation constantly appearing in the simple events of nature and human relationships, bearing indelible witness to the grace of God. Technique is something that attempts to suppress nature (nature not merely in the sense of rocks, trees, and animals, but in the sense of the original integrity of the creation), but over which nature eventually will be triumphant because nature still bears the potentiality for restoration. Ellul, on the other hand, as one might expect from a Protestant in the Reform tradition, says that we must look to a transcendence outside the system to break the hold of the system. Certainly, Merton would not deny the need for the transcendent. The goal of contemplation is union with the transcendent. Moreover, ecumenical discussions of the past few years have raised interesting questions about the traditional categories in which the old Catholic-Protestant debates have previously been carried out. The fact remains that for all their similarities with regard to the character and consequences of technique, the point at which Ellul and Merton probably would have some interesting dialogue is technique in light of Genesis 1-3.

Memoriam, continued.

Mme Ellul's hospitality was legendary: she welcomed many Ellul scholars with great quantities of tea time goodies and impressive meals, in addition to lively, thoughtful conversation. Few outsiders probably suspected the extent of Mme Ellul's generous hospitality which included dinner every night for the foreign-born wife of a student of Ellul's, during the years the student served in the French forces of World War II.

Jacques Ellul's frequent spontaneous tributes to his wife can perhaps best be summed up in his response to from Daniel Clendenin (in his 1987 interview with him). He was asked what he considered most important to him as he looked back over the years. Ellul responded that his leadership and creation of the French Reformed parish in Pessac (where the Elluls have lived for decades outside Bordeaux) "gave me the most joy because I did it with my wife."

Book Reviews Continued

***Ethics After Babel* by Jeffrey Stout. Beacon Press: Boston, 1988, xiv + 338pp.**

Reviewed by David Werther

One of the most obvious features of ethical theory is that the great ethical theorists advocated different accounts of morality. Jeffrey Stout emphasizes this pluralism; "the languages of morals and their discontents" is the subtitle of his book. According to Professor Stout, understanding and evaluating alternative ethical views is difficult because one's perspective is always colored by one's own moral language. The ethicist, no more than the scientist, can claim to do her assessment from some neutral and perfectly objective vantage point. What she can do is engage in "immanent criticism" insofar as she is able to grasp aspects of another view.

Such criticism consists of drawing attention to the internal inconsistencies of a view. When adherents of the moral language so criticized come to recognize the inadequacies of their tradition they will want to modify it. In doing so, they may utilize aspects of other moral languages. Stout refers to the process of dropping some aspects of a received moral language and drawing upon different languages to replace those features, thereby solving otherwise intractable problems, as "bricolage." Thomistic ethics is cited as a classic case of bricolage.

As Stout sees it, our moral problems cannot be dealt with effectively apart from an understanding of Thomistic ethics, as well as other theologically informed moral theories, for at least two reasons. First, aspects of these views appear in contemporary ethical discourse. We cannot begin to understand our own moral vocabulary if we are not aware of its origins. Second, our liberal tradition can be seen as an attempt to avoid the bloody conflicts that came about because disagreements between religious groups could not be solved peacefully. It may be then that the language of liberalism has resources unavailable in religiously based ethical views for handling the problems posed by pluralism. If this is so, then there is good reason for preferring liberalism to the communitarian ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre and others.

In the final analysis Professor Stout wishes to distance himself from what he takes to be facile dichotomies between liberalism and communitarianism, subjectivity and objectivity, and creation and discovery. He tries to undermine these distinctions through immanent criticism and offers an alternative that is the result of his bricolage. Stout's internal critiques of work by Kai Nielsen, James Gustafson, Alan Donagan and Alasdair MacIntyre are superb.

Stout's bricolage seems to be less successful. For example, he sets out to formulate an account of morality that would avoid "the spectre of relativism." To be sure, he does manage to provide us with a view that avoids a number of kinds of relativism. Nevertheless, he opts for a theory in which truth is language dependent, "... truth is a property of interpreted sentences, and interpreted sentences belong to languages, which are human creations" (p. 54). If moral truths are human creations then their truth is contingent upon our existence and linguistic practices. Readers who consider this sort of commitment to contingency, and hence relativism, problematic will not find Stout's bricolage ultimately acceptable. Even so, I suspect that they will want to wrestle with the arguments in *Ethics After Babel* for it is the work of a gifted philosopher.