

# The Ellul Forum

for the Critique of Technological Civilization

July 1993 Issue #11 ©1993 Department of Religious Studies University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620

## Technique and Utopia Revisited

### From the Editor

I must apologize for the lateness of this issue of the *Ellul Forum* which should have been published in July. On June 7th, I had an operation and spent the month of June recuperating. That lost month put me hopelessly behind in all my commitments and I am only now beginning to catch up. As a consequence, I have postponed the subject matter I was planning for this issue—ethics in a techno-bureaucratic society—until the January issue, and I called upon my good friend and mentor, Gabriel Vahanian (Université de Strasbourg), to share with us a dialogue that has been going on between him and Maurice Weyembergh, a philosopher from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel who has recently published a book on politics and technique. With this issue (#11), the *Forum* begins its sixth year. It was back in issue #5 (June 1990) that the *Forum* first focused on Gabriel Vahanian's utopian theology. With this issue, we return to that theme to reflect on of technology and utopia in Ellul and Vahanian. Since the theme of apocalypse and utopia in Ellul and Vahanian has dominated my own work, especially my new book *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?*, I could not resist intruding into the dialogue between Vahanian and Weyembergh to voice a third opinion. I hope they will forgive me for doing so. In any case, I am very grateful to Gabby Vahanian for his editorial work on this issue and I and I will let him tell you about it.

But before I do, I wish to call your attention to what seems to me to be a new stage emerging in Ellul studies. You will note several significant announcements on the Bulletin Board (pp. 2-3). A new Ellul Institute has been formed in the U.S. and a new Ellul Association has been formed in France. At the same time Wheaton College has established a microfilmed collection of Ellul's work and a conference is being held in Bordeaux on Ellul's work on technique and society. Clearly the study of Ellul's work is undergoing a new level of consolidation which seems to be occurring simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Darrell J. Fasching, Editor*

### About This Issue

It all began when our paths crossed and, remembering the *Ellul Forum*, I naturally asked Maurice Weyembergh for an article. He knew Ellul, and had devoted over a third of a book just published to a study of Ellul and Hans Jonas: *Entre politique et technique: aspects de l'utopisme contemporain* (Vrin, Paris 1991, FF150.00).

A philosopher, interested in political theory and social policy, Weyembergh teaches both at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel and at the Université Libre de Bruxelles. With Gilbert Hottois, he also is in charge of the renowned and most prolific Center for Interdisciplinary Research in Bioethics.

Not only does Weyembergh know Ellul, but he has practiced him from an angle entirely different from yours or mine - that of a philosopher, who probably is not ignorant of Ellul's almost visceral reticence about philosophy, and whose assessment of Ellul's contribution is therefore all the more significant. With Weyembergh, the authors whose company Ellul "keeps" suddenly appear bearing different names: those of Sartre, Rene Girard, Hannah Arendt, Schelsky, Bloch, Heidegger, Marx, Hegel, and so on. Barth is never mentioned. Nor is the reason simply because Weyembergh is no theologian. The reason, I surmise, is that, by eliding the shadow Barth's thought casts over Ellul's, while retaining Ellul's religious problematic, he allows Ellul to appear, not only undiminished, but also wholesome. Thus society and technology, rather than merely corrupting one another, belong

### In This Issue

*Bulletin Board* p. 2

*Forum: Technique and Utopia Revisited*  
Ellul and Vahanian on  
Technology and Utopia  
by M. Weyembergh p. 4

*Back to Ellul by Way of Weyembergh*  
by Gabriel Vahanian p. 8

*Ellul and Vahanian: Apocalypse or Utopia?*  
by Darrell J. Fasching p. 10

*Book Reviews*  
*Lire Ellul* by Patrick  
Troude-Chastenet.  
Reviewed by Gabriel  
Vahanian p. 12

*The Social Creation of Nature*  
by Neil Evernden  
Reviewed by Nicola  
Hoggard Creegan p. 13

*About the Ellul Forum* p. 15  
History  
Manuscript Submissions  
Subscriptions  
Bibliographic Reviews  
Book Reviews

# Bulletin Board

## The Ellul Institute Founded in Riverside California

The Ellul Institute has recently been established in Riverside California under the leadership of Dr. Donald J. Evans, Executive Director. Dr. Evans indicates that "higher education and particularly some Christian institutions do little to enter into fruitful dialogue on the wide variety of social and political issues facing American society and the world." The Institute seeks to change that. He believes that Ellul's work has "the potential to shape Christian thinking and better equip them to preach and teach their message of hope to a needy world." The goals of the institute are to :

- Advance the spirit of Ellul's work
- Conduct educational activities
- Maintain a media center
- Foster a scholarly network
- Provide a theological-ethical perspective
- Promote Christian Scholarship
- Disseminate results to interested publics

The institute will organize conferences, workshops and seminars as well as publish occasional papers, a quarterly newsletter, conference proceedings, etc. The Institute especially seeks to establish a communications network between interested scholars via both printed and electronic media. For further information contact: Dr. Donald J. Evans, Executive Director, The Ellul Institute, 8432 Magnolia Avenue, Suite 113, Riverside, CA 92504-3297. Phone (909) 689-5771, ext. 211, FAX (909) 351-18081.

## New Editorial Board Appointments and International Subscriptions

Clifford Christians has accepted my invitation to become the Associate Editor of the *Ellul Forum*. He has been a valued contributing member of the Editorial Board since the beginning and I look forward to working more closely with him on future issues of the *Forum*.

Peter W.F. Davies of Buckinghamshire College in England has joined the editorial board of the *Ellul Forum*. Dr. Davies teaches in Business School. He will also act as circulation manager for the *Forum* in England. In the near future the *Forum* hopes to establish circulation managers in Holland and/or France. This means that international subscribers should find it easier to subscribe since they will not have to have their subscription checks made out in American dollars. I hope to have more news on these arrangements for the next issue. In the meantime persons in England and on the Continent can subscribe in English pounds. Send inquiries to: Peter W.F. Davies,

The Hollies, Back Lane,  
Chalfont-St.-Giles, Buckinghamshire,  
HP8 4PB, England.

## Wheaton College Establishes the Jacques Ellul Collection

The Special Collections division of the Buswell Library at Wheaton College has established a special collection of materials devoted to the writings of Jacques Ellul. The collection is the gift of Dr. Joyce Main Hanks. Wheaton's collection is based upon a three-reel microfilm set (Series I) compiled for "Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography," in *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, supplement 1, 1984, which Hanks prepared with the assistance of Rolf Asal, and followed in 1991 with "Jacques Ellul: A Comprehensive Bibliography Update," *Research in Philosophy and Technology*, vol. 11. Photocopies have been made from the microfilm and include nearly all of Ellul's articles, essays, etc., as well as reviews of his work. The collection comprises approximately 12 linear feet.

Series II -- prints from the microfilm, numbering over 6,000 -- comprise the bulk of the collection (7.5 linear feet). These prints are primary sources of Ellul's writings, dissertations, and books (1936-83). Secondary sources include articles and book reviews (1939-1984). Ellul's writings are arranged chronologically (per the Bibliography which serves as a finding aid).

Series VII contains media material, including interviews with Ellul conducted by Joyce Hanks (16 cassettes) and others (3 cassettes), 4 cassettes of lectures, addresses, and a transcription of the October 1979 CBC program, "Ideas," with Russ Germain, Bill Vandenburg and Morris Wolfe.

Secondary material finishes the collection with works on Ellul, critical reviews, correspondence concerning Ellul, and serials on Ellul studies.

The collection was primarily processed by Jeffrey Darenburg during the academic years 1991-92 and 1992-93. It is the policy of the Special Collections, in compliance with copyright law, to not photocopy manuscript and unpublished material without the author's approval.

For further information contact the Wheaton College Special Collections:

Buswell Library Special Collections  
Wheaton College  
Wheaton, IL 60187-5593  
(708) 752-5705, (708) 752-5855 FAX  
wcarchiv@wheaton.edu

## The "Association Jacques Ellul" Formed in Bordeaux

Colleagues and students of the work of Jacques Ellul in France have announced the formation of the "Association Jacques Ellul." The main objectives of the Association are to:

Preserve the collected works and carry on the initiatives begun by Ellul. This includes:

1. Preserving both his published and unpublished writings; conference notes of his lectures taken by his students and others, and also audio and video recordings. Also writings on Jacques Ellul or inspired by his thought and other diverse archival materials.
2. Organizing scholarly activities on his thought or around the dominant themes of his work.
3. The establishment of relations with other organizations or associations in France and other countries who have an interest in Ellul's scientific and/or theological work.

If you are interested in joining send your name and address (and institutional affiliation if any) with a check for 50 Francs to : l'Association Jacques ELLUL, 42 avenue Henri Fruges -33600 PESSAC France. Checks should be made out to "l'Association Jacques ELLUL."

## Conference Planned in Bordeaux on "Technique and Society in the Work of Jacques Ellul"

On November 12th and 13th 1993 a conference on "Technique and Society in the Work of Jacques Ellul" will be held at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Bordeaux France. This conference is bringing together scholars from around the world to address the following questions:

1. Is Ellul's analysis of the social transformations engendered by the development of technique confirmable?
2. Are the concepts elaborated by Ellul for analyzing "technique" adequate? Especially how can the conceptual problems posed by the notions of "technical autonomy" (autonomie de la technique) and "technical system" (systeme technicien) be clarified.

Anyone interested in attending should call Chantal DEMONGIN or Isabelle TANNIOU at 011-56-17-11-02 in Bordeaux.

to an ellipse, utopia, of which they are the two foci. Not that, to repeat, the religious configuration of Ellul's thought is blotted out. It simply has ceased demarcating a special domain side by side with that of nature and that of history or, for that matter, fused with one or the other. Weyembergh sees Ellul as trying to avoid two antagonistic pitfalls: naturalism and artificialism - although, on the one hand, ecology, retrieved from naturalism, is not rejected and, on the other, *making* is adjudicated as not being less noble an act than *being*. Still, artificialism, felt as ominous and thoroughly resented all the way, is systematically run down, while naturalism, Christian or otherwise, fails to make sense today. The latter's anti-technological utopianism. At this point, Weyembergh's distinction between utopianism and utopia comes in handy, but doesn't entirely win my support. Like Ellul's, his man or woman is not so much a symbol-making animal, yearning for utopia or the New Jerusalem, as he or she is an inveterate sacralizer, bent on building one Babel after another.

Be that as it may, Weyembergh responded to my request with the lead article that follows. For reasons of health, Jacques Ellul was not able to comment on it. And I chose to adopt a different tack by proposing, so to speak, to go "back to Ellul" by way of a reply to Weyembergh. Only, in order to give it a personal touch, I should like to clarify a few points.

With respect to the question whether technology is neutral or not, I differ from Ellul for the same reason that, as the Christian tradition has asserted, humanity is sinful only *before* God, and not *per se*.

Charging me with verbal *magisme*, Weyembergh nonetheless contends that "technology does not tell what the essence of a thing is, but transforms its essence." Where does one find essences, if not in language and its magic (if one must call it so)? And, worse still, is not such a sentence the very same kind of description which technology supposedly shies off?

Nor am I intimidated by Weyembergh's assimilation of *logos* and being and, moreover, just because technology dismisses ontology, I resist the temptation to which he yields by identifying technology with the demise of language. Or could it possibly be that I must simply admit to being less beholden than he is to traditional categories still caught up in the web of substantialist ideology.

Finally, I am literally dumbfounded by the charge that I am replacing one dualism by another -- and the one Weyembergh suggests is definitely the least likely of all! Truly, I should not have to defend myself. With Martin Buber, whom I quote from memory, all I am saying is that the bible speaks of no division between sacred and profane; it only speaks of the Holy and that which is not yet holy. The bible speaks of hallowing and, accordingly, asserts that in the beginning was the word, a word that acts -- and changes the world, by changing swords into ploughshares, water into wine, cliches into metaphors.

*Gabriel Vahanian, Guest Editor*

# Forum: Technique and Utopianism Revisited

## Ellul and Vahanian On Technology and Utopianism

by Maurice Weyembergh<sup>1</sup>

Before comparing Ellul's and Vahanian's conceptions of Utopia and technology, I would like to put my article in perspective and indicate its limits. My analysis will be based on Vahanian's last book, *L'utopie chrétienne*<sup>2</sup> and I will compare his thesis with Ellul's. Both authors are in search of a Christian theology and an ethics for the modern world. Convinced of the specificity of our world, they try to define it and to reconstruct its genealogy. Science and technology have become the determining factors of our life and the problem is how to cope with their exigencies without giving up our humanity. If Ellul has written many books about theology, he is also the author of numerous historical, sociological and juridical works: the non-theological aspects of technology and politics, for instance, belong to his field of research. Vahanian is essentially a theologian: technology, then, is not analyzed in itself; what interests him is the possible religious origin or background of the technological development in our modern world and its consequences for the religious life and thinking. Another major aspect of the specificity of our world, which is related, as we shall see, to technology, is its utopianism. Both thinkers have analyzed this phenomenon, but they differ radically in their judgment, essentially positive for Vahanian, definitely negative for Ellul. If the comparison between both thinkers needs any further justification, it should be noted that the direct or indirect references to Ellul's work are numerous in Vahanian's book (pp.10, 33, 48, 41, 53, 62, 129, 191, 218, 221, 223, 305, 312). *L'utopie chrétienne* is somehow a personal meditation on and an answer to many Ellulian themes.

As for myself, and speaking of limits, I am not a theologian, but a philosopher; my interest in the topic is not religious, but historical and critical: to see how two Protestant theologians analyze and judge the modern world. It is obvious that a short article cannot explore and take into account the richness and variety of their thought. Concerning Ellul, I refer the interested reader to my other studies.<sup>3</sup> In the following pages I will limit myself to a sketch of three main themes of Ellul and Vahanian - the specificity of the West, utopianism and technology, and the problem of the language.

### 1) The Specificity of the West

Ellul has presented his vision of the western world in *La trahison de l'Occident* (The Betrayal of the West).<sup>4</sup> The title is very clear: the West has betrayed the West, it has become unfaithful to its origins; the result of a *self-betrayal* can of course only be negative. It is based on the inversion of three fundamental human faculties:

1) The West has understood the best, among all cultures, what liberty means, especially on the level of *history* man can and should make history; but the West has not been careful enough to avoid the paroxysmic component of liberty: liberty always tends towards more liberty and ends by destroying itself. If man

can make history, he is not, however, its absolute master: God has his way in the process;

2) The West has brought out the potentialities of *reason*, the task of which is not to eliminate feelings and passions, but to control them. Reason however can go too far and forget its balance-bringing function. It becomes then *rationality* and *rationalism*. Rationality reduces everything to its quantitative aspects and neglects or eliminates its non-quantifiable components. Measure (balance) becomes measuring. Rationalism forgets the critical function of reason, especially towards reason itself, and changes into the myth of reason, into scientism;

3) The dynamics of the West is due to the development of two antithetical forms of love, *eros* and *agape*, the possessive love, the will to power, and the brotherly love, charity. Possessive love is just another name for *espoir* (hope related to human needs and achievements), brotherly love for *espérance* (hope related to the expectations of faith). Ellul interprets one of St. Paul's dreams, which invites him to go to Greece, as a divine intervention: it indicates that the Greek *eros* has to be completed and balanced by the Christian *agape*. The opposition between them has caused, in Ellul's understanding, the extraordinary dynamics of the West. But *eros* has subdued and destroyed, little by little, *agape*.

If you bring together paroxysmic liberty, rationality, rationalism and will to power, you get a rather explosive cocktail: this dangerous mixture explains Ellul's concern about the future of the West. One of the results of this development is the rise of the technological system and the madness of utopianism, which constitutes the peak of *l'espoir*. Ellul, needless to say, is a prophet of doom.

Vahanian's vision is quite different. He sees this specificity as the consequence of the history of Europe: it is linked to a change in the religious paradigm, the passage from the paradigm of the sacred to that of the utopian. Although there exists no pure paradigm - there are elements of the utopian conception in myth and mythical vestiges in utopianism - Vahanian contends that that change, which is still going on, is the real background, the determining factor of western history. Technology, then, is a product of the utopianism of the new religious paradigm; it is, however, an effect which reinforces its cause. For Vahanian, this move is essentially *positive*, even if he recognizes that classic utopia (literary utopia) and technological utopianism, left uncontrolled, can lead to the destruction of the planet.

Let us look more closely at the two paradigms and underline from the start that *L'utopie chrétienne* is based on a systematic opposition between them and on sets of antithetic concepts. The passage from one paradigm to the other brings about the death of God, which does not at all mean the accession of humanity to adulthood and the obsolescence of the Father figure, but the passage from a soteriological myth to an utopian religiosity. In the first you expect to leave *this* world for another (*changer de*

*monde*), in the latter you try to change the world (*changer le monde*), a world of scarcity, and to eliminate the shortages. In the myth everything is based on the determinism of nature (being) and its evolution or on the determinism of history and its fatality; their laws cannot be transgressed and you have to follow the path which goes from the *beginning* to the *end*. With utopian religiosity the determinisms of nature and history are broken: the fundamental categories are creation and the *new (novum)* on the one hand and the *ultimate (eschaton)* on the other. Creation implies that you start anew, that the new building is without any precedent. In its perspective nature is not only the given (*la donnée*), which you cannot change, but a gift (*le don, la donnee*), which can and has to be improved (p.257). The ultimate refers to the land of Promise: the land of Canaan or the church as the body of Christ are its approximations, but they may not be confused with the Reign of God itself. The difference implies that the future remains open.

In the paradigm of the sacred there is no room for discussion and the use of language is irrelevant, since any "no" is excluded (saying "yes" implies the possibility of saying "no"). To God, however, you can say "no": God reveals himself (*Dieu s'expose*), he does not *impose* anything. The possibility opened by the dialogue with God explains that He can be challenged: the *holy* is not the *sacred*. At the same time it makes us responsible for our choices and our decisions: the ethical dimension becomes essential.

A great deal of Vahanian's book is dedicated to the description of this change of paradigm; secularization, desacralization, demythologization, disenchantment and deconstruction are dealt with and analyzed. The religions of the East belong to the paradigm of the sacred, those of the West to the utopian paradigm. Vahanian tries to show that Judaism and Greek thought are at the origins of this process of secularization (it brings *this* world to the fore) and of the desacralization of religion through religion itself. In Christ these two elements, the Jewish and the Greek, come together and reinforce one another. Vahanian too refers to St. Paul's trip to Greece, but to underline that there is, despite the differences, something in common between the *Logos* and the *Word*: the openness to the new, to utopianism (the utopia of the *cosmos* and that of the *land of promise* for instance).

This brief sketch of Ellul's and Vahanian's conceptions allows us to see the fundamental difference in approach: the development of the technological system and of utopianism is the result of a betrayal of the most remarkable western achievements for Ellul. For Vahanian, technology and utopianism are the "children" of Greece, Judaism and Christianity, and it would be foolish to reject them; it would be an enormous historical mistake not to see that the line which relates them to their "parents" is direct, in spite of the possible distortions. To put it bluntly, technology is a basic potentiality of the Christian heritage, not its betrayal.

## 2) Technology and Utopianism

Ellul has analyzed technology in three of his books, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle (The Technological Society)*, *Le système technicien* and *Le bluff technologique*.<sup>5</sup> The six or eight characteristics of technology, six in 1954, eight in 1977, are well-known. As a system, made possible by the invention of the computer and the theory of information, it tries to submit everything to its totalizing tendency. This tendency, however, is doomed to fail, because the substrates of technology, nature, society and man, cannot be totally reduced without being destroyed: dysfunctions develop and will finally ruin the system. But in the meantime, nature, society, man and his world of symbols will have been savaged. Ellul's description follows a recurrent pattern in his works: man is merely a sorcerer's apprentice, when he abandons his religious faith and only relies on human hope to change this world. The tools he invents, be it money, the city, the State or technology in general, become independent of their inventor's control and impose their own logic, which is not at all

a human one. They become systems which work for their own sake, neither for man's sake nor for God's glory. In his theological works he describes them as *exousiae*, demonic powers which oppose God's intentions and take possession of man's soul.<sup>6</sup>

Utopianism makes the totalizing tendency inherent in the system (the city, the State, technology) *explicit* and *conscious*: it gives the system its inspiration (ideology) and/or its "finishing touch". The technological system and the technological utopianism are parallel phenomena which make one another complete, perfect. Ellul then radically rejects every form of utopia -- he is more "utopiaphobic" than "technophobic" --, and for an obvious reason: utopia, the peak of the purely human hope, is the malevolent, perverse rival of *l'espérance*, the hope based on faith. Only the latter knows that a purely human enterprise, devoid of any divine inspiration, cannot succeed. The curse of the prophet Ellul on utopianism is total. *Espoir* and *espérance* are as different as will to power and brotherly love or as revolution and revelation.

The specificity of the religious hope cannot be reduced without destroying the core of faith. Otherwise Ellul and Ernst Bloch, the author of *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, would preach the same gospel; in fact they are rival brothers, bitter enemies (in Bloch's eyes the classless society implies that religion, the people's opium, would be given up). Messianism and utopianism (marxism) do not coincide. The Reign of God will come, but *He* and *He alone* chooses the moment; in the meantime, the Christian, who is *in* this world but *not from* this world (*il est dans le monde mais pas de ce monde*),<sup>7</sup> has to live according to his faith. He is like the Knight of Durer; with his eyes fixed on his aim, the New Jerusalem, he is riding between Death and Devil. He knows that his enterprise here on earth might fail, but his *esperance* will allow him to start anew.

Vahanian's comments on technology as such are scarce and, as I said earlier, he does not give us any thorough description or critique of the *phénomène technique*, although he uses this well-known Ellulian expression (from *The Technological Society*). He considers that technology, from the simplest tool to the most sophisticated computer, is *one*: it changes man. There are of course differences in the way in which and the degree to which they affect him; technology as *method* is more than just a tool (which only prolongs the human body): it not only alters man more radically but also transforms the world, it humanizes them both. The thesis of the "oneness" of technology has to be discussed and not only asserted; it could be, and that is just Ellul's conception, that the nature of technology changes in the course of its development. What is positive in the beginning can become negative or threatening by its quantitative growth. A change in quantity can cause a change in quality. For Vahanian --and this is anti-Ellulian too--, technology is *neutral* in itself (pp.53,216), neither good nor bad; its consequences depend on the manner in which man uses it. In Ellul's opinion, with the appearance of the *phénomène technique* and the *système technicien*, technology has its autonomy, its own development: he contends that any discourse about the neutrality of technology is a platitude or a dangerous mistake.

But, as I noted earlier, Vahanian's aim is not to give a description of modern technology, but to try to interpret "the theological significance" (p.53) of its rise and evolution in the West and its consequences for religion. We have seen that the passage from the paradigm of the sacred to that of the utopian is Vahanian's explanation of the origins of technology. The problem is to know if secularization, which has been the condition of possibility of technology, will not lead, reinforced as it is by the development of science and technology (they do not need Christianity any more), to sheer secularism, to the end of Christianity, to the death of God (and not only of the soteriological God).

Vahanian refuses this interpretation. In his opinion -- and this is in my eyes the most original and at the same time the most risky part of his book -- technology could help to rediscover and to deepen the utopianism of Christianity, it could help to purify the

utopian paradigm from its sacred "reminiscences". Vahanian contends that at bottom the problem of technology is theological.

But this means that theology should accept to modify itself radically, that it should create *une nouvelle matrice noétique* ("a new noetic matrix", p.294), that the church should "convert itself again" (p.227) in order to bring about a "spiritual revolution" (p.87), without which it would be "a world too late" (p.85).

Why, then, can technology be the motor of a new civilization (and let us not forget that Christianity is not bound to a special civilization)? For different reasons: it is global and planetary; it brings classes, cultures, and religions together; it puts "the world into man's hands" (p.193); it throws a new light on man and shows that he is still to be made (p.315): man produces products which produce him (p.315); it challenges God (p.312). Since it creates a new man and a new world and since it helps to solve the problem of scarcity which obliged man to leave this world for another instead of changing it, technology can henceforth realize all possibilities. But, since not all of them are useful or desirable, man has to choose between them. Technology, then, brings us back to the *necessity* of a new ethics: looking backward cannot offer any solutions, because the possibilities are new. Our decisions concern the future, the utopia, in which we shall have to live. All in all, this *theological understanding* of technology brings the Christian back to the sources of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the utopianism which inspires the technological civilization, in fact the *modern experience of transcendence* (p.414), has to be reinterpreted, along the lines of Christian utopianism (which includes creation, hope (*espérance*), redemption and the Reign of God).

Vahanian is thus quite positive towards utopia and utopianism. Of course, he is not blind to their dangers; the classic utopias, for instance, which reduce religion to politics or politics to religion are criticized. More important yet: many utopias propose that the author calls a *final solution*, a perfect state or society which, once realized, may not be changed any more; it would mean altering and destroying the perfection. Utopianism for Vahanian has to remain open: a final solution implies the sacralization of a situation, it falls back into the paradigm of the sacred. The land of Canaan bears some resemblance to the Promised Land, but they do not coincide: any sort of state of a fully developed technological civilization is not to be confused with the New Jerusalem, the Reign of God.

The difference then is irreducible: to Vahanian technological utopianism has its roots in Christian utopianism and it has to be reinvested by religious hope. To Ellul utopianism and technology have their roots in *eros*, the will to power, and *espoir* and *esperance* differ in nature, not in degree. The opposition will become quite clear in Ellul's and Vahanian's conception of language. Vahanian's interpretation of God and of the Christian faith is much more metaphorical, while Ellul's conception remains much more literal.

### 3) The Problem of Language

In Ellul's view God has initiated the dialogue with man. But man is free and he has the possibility to refuse the divine call: many prophets-Jonas for instance to whom Ellul is particularly attached-do not respond immediately to God's appeal. History then is unforseeable, even for God. Other options are possible: man can create his own tools in such a way, as we noted, that they take possession of his mind. He sacralizes them and becomes their servant: God's Word is finally covered by their noise, ignored or forgotten. The result can be the silence of God, His turning away from man. Our modern world is dominated by these two events, and nihilism is the unavoidable consequence.

In *Le système technicien* Ellul has contended that with the development of the system and its totalizing tendency, the symbolical mediations, which in the West are related for a good part to the Christian religion, are destroyed by or subordinated to the technological mediations. The cost of technological progress is the destruction of the symbolical orientation systems and man's

symbolical misery. The Word, as Ellul puts it in the title of one of his books<sup>8</sup>, has been humiliated, partly by the production, reproduction and spreading of the images and idols. The need of symbolical orientation can lead modern man, and particularly the artist who is bound to symbols, to two extreme and useless endeavors: on the one hand the flight into a symbolical but fictive and irrational world, cut from the reality of the technological system, as if a life outside or above the system were possible; on the other the attempt to supersede it by an artificial production of symbols, which must fail: the technological system is quite alien to the symbolical mediation, it only works according to its own demands. *Laoanism* (the school of the French analyst) develops for instance, in Ellul's view, a kind of verbal *magicianry* (*un magisme verbal*) which deludes itself with the thought that words can master the world of things.<sup>9</sup> The unity of technology (wherever it appears, it has the same characteristics, produces the same consequences and the same rhythm and mode of life) and its *universality* (all activities can be submitted to and organized along technological rules which require the same mode of thinking) destroy the particularities of the different cultural worlds. Up-rootedness and uniformity are the consequences.

Ellul is very critical of the recent trends in linguistics, especially of structural linguistics, which, in his opinion, reduces symbols to signs and language to technological communication. This reduction is parallel to the invasion by the theory of information and by the binary language of the computer. Since that language is based on the principle of non-contradiction, Ellul goes so far as to contend that the computer would be incapable of apprehending a dialectical comprehension of the world.<sup>10</sup> This assertion needs to be clarified and specified: the "language" of the computer itself has to be distinguished from the language of its users. If Hegel and Marx had had a computer with word processing programs at their disposal, they could have used it without any difficulty for their dialectical thinking. The binary language of the computer does not prevent from writing symbolical, poetical or dialectical texts; it is just the manner in which it stores the words. Most computer users completely ignore the "language" of the "machine". The engineers who design the computer are compelled to respect the demands of the binary system in order to have the machine work but they are not obliged to think along its lines, even when they wonder how to improve it.

Vahanian's views on the subject are quite different. Let us begin with a critical note. His chapters on language are perhaps the most difficult to read: they are allusive and associative rather than analytical or argumentative. Moreover his attitude as a writer towards language differs radically from Ellul's, which can be inspired, especially in the theological works as, for instance, *Sans feu ni lieu*,<sup>11</sup> but remains essentially classical or traditionalist. Vahanian likes to play with words, being in turn funny, ironical, disrespectful, decisive, poetical or oracular. He admires Lacan, whom he quotes rather often, and is interested by the recent evolution of linguistics. Thus, he accepts the reduction of symbols or signs and finds it positive; in a bold movement, he even proposes to interpret the line which separates the signifier from the signified as a *screen* rather than as a *mask*. He cannot resist a pun (some are excellent as that about *ancrer/encreur, to anchor/to ink*, p.250), he likes to play with ready-made expressions but to distort them and have them say just the opposite of what one might expect. In his chapters about language, the reader gets the impression that Vahanian's language becomes somehow independent of the subject, language in general, and plays its own games, for its own sake. This may, of course, be intended as an illustration of the creative, utopian power of language, but it does not help the reader.

Now God is not an idol, he is holy and not sacred. For Vahanian, His creation through the Word is, as we noted, creation of something new, something without precedent coming out of a *non-lieu*, a juridical term meaning that there is no basis for prosecution; however, Vahanian uses the expression in its etymo-

logical meaning of being "without a place", in Greek "ou-topos", utopia.

Speech then is utopian. The danger is that what was new and came from *nowhere* at the moment of its creation can be fixed, sacralized, and become a *final solution*. The *non-lieu* from which it emerged can be reduced to a *lieu-dit*, a well-known spot. That is what happened to the language of faith; it was sterilized and frozen through mere repetition. Vahanian proposes to rejuvenate the "language of faith" by "faith as language". He hopes that, through faith, speech and interpretation of texts will find their creative, risky character again. If I understand him rightly, saying *I believe* should be such a creative, utopian speech act, coming from a nowhere (from non-belief), not turned to the past and to the rejection of the technological civilization, but to the future. Theology then has to defrost its language.

In the speech relation between God and man or between men, faith as language liberates the partners from the determinism of nature and history. Language has a fundamental role to play in the humanization of man and nature: its utopian character means that man can never feel himself as complete, as being *tout l'homme*, and think of society as making possible that *tout homme* (every man) becomes *tout l'homme* man is his totality. If this were ever to be realized, the Reign of God, the pleroma, would have been achieved.

What is the relationship, then, between technology and language? Vahanian's answer is that technology is merely a form of language which has been made possible through the use of language itself. This is contrary to Ellul's view: God's or man's language do not have the same features as technology. Between the symbolical mediation and the technological mediation there is, as between *espérance* and *espoir*, a difference of nature, not of degree. You can reduce the symbolical to the technological (*espérance* to *espoir*, faith to belief) and lose all its substance, but you cannot jump or go back from the technological to the symbolical (from *espoir* to *espérance*, from belief to faith) without rejecting the technological exigencies.<sup>12</sup> I see the proof of this radical opposition to Vahanian's thesis in the fact that Ellul has written a quite positive foreword to a (remarkable) book by G. Hottois, *Le signe et la technique*.<sup>13</sup> Hottois' main thesis is that *technique*<sup>14</sup> is not all of the nature of the *logos*, (discourse), and especially theo-logy and philosophy (onto-logy), are rather at a loss when confronted with technology: technology does not *describe* man, nature or the world, it does not tell what man ought to do, it *acts into* them (and not only *upon* them); it does not tell what the *essence* of a thing is, it *transforms* its essence. In fact, technology makes ontology impossible: it creates new beings and changes the old ones. To think that language has the same properties as technology is somehow to remain in or fall back into magic. From Ellul's and Hottois' point of view, Vahanian's conception is essentially metaphorical, it is comparable to Lacanism and partakes of its *magisme verbal*.

If I understand him rightly, from Vahanian's point of view, Ellul remains the prisoner of the dualism inherent in the sacred (the symbol is different from the sign, as *espérance* is different from *espoir*, and faith from belief). But Ellul could answer that Vahanian replaces one dualism, that of the sacred and the profane, by another, but between the paradigm of the sacred and the utopian paradigm. He could argue that Vahanian's book is based on a very long list of pairs of antithetic concepts.

To end this sketch I would like to address a critique to both Ellul and Vahanian. From my point of view, it is necessary to distinguish between eschatology, utopia and utopianism. Eschatology is the knowledge of the ultimate things and is essentially religious: the *eschaton* is revealed by God, by an apocalypse. Utopia is a literary genre, in which the author tries by speculation to imagine a better or a perfect type of man and society. He knows, that that society does not exist anywhere and that it is quite probably not realizable. The partisan of utopianism, on the contrary, is convinced that the perfect society is realizable and will

be realized by his own efforts: the passage from utopia to utopianism is a consequence of the myth of the French Revolution. Through revolution man will indeed achieve utopia, perfection. In my view utopia is a very useful exercise, because it is critical of the evils of every existing situation; utopianism, on the contrary, is rather dangerous: its partisans are *true believers*, militants (for instance the communists) who easily jump to the conclusion that the perfection of things to come justifies whichever measure they take. Ellul insists on the distinction between eschatology on the one hand and utopia and utopianism on the other. But he does not make any difference between utopia and utopianism, which explains why he rejects them both without nuances. It fits his strategy of discrediting profane hope in order to elevate religious hope. Vahanian does not ignore these distinctions, but his main thesis -- technological utopianism is a product of Christian utopianism -- obliges him to blur them or at least to reduce them: he does so by using the word utopia and utopianism in its etymological meaning, *ou-topos*, *non-lieu*, "nowhere", and by extending it to eschatology. The device matches his purpose: metaphorical language has its merits, but I wonder whether it serves the interest of clarity.

## NOTES

1. I wish to thank my wife who has looked over the English.
2. Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1992.
3. "Espoir et espérance chez J. Ellul" in *L'expérience du temps. Mélanges offerts à J. Paumen*, Ousia, Bruxelles, 1989, pp. 199-226; *Entre politique et technique. Aspects de l'utopisme contemporain*, especially chapter IV, "La critique de la technique et de l'utopie chez J. Ellul et H. Jonas", *Vrin, Paris, 1991, pp. 151-218*.
4. Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1975.
5. Armand Colin, Paris 1954; Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 1977; Hachette, Paris 1988.
6. *Les nouveaux possédés*, Fayard, Paris, 1973.
7. *La foi au prix du doute*, Hachette, Paris, 1980, p.322.
8. *La parole humiliée*, Seuil, Paris, 1981.
9. *Le système technicien*, p.128.
10. *Le système technicien*, p.117.
11. Gallimard, Paris, 1975.
12. *La foi au prix du doute*, pp.158-162.
13. Aubier, Paris, 1984.
14. It is quite typical that, in his writings in French, Ellul, refuses to use the word *technologie* for *technique*: in techno-logy you have the word *logos*. *Le bluff technologique* means the bluff of the discourse about technology, not the bluff of technology.

# Back to Ellul by Way of Weyembergh

By Gabriel Vahanian

He still defies classification, but Jacques Ellul no longer is as solitary a figure as his legend has persistently claimed him to be. Though the number of articles and books – not to speak of dissertations – written about him abroad by far outweighs those published in France, his name constantly, regularly, appears in an increasingly wider range of works. Cited even by people who have not really read him, Ellul is rather close to having become sort of a public monument passers-by see without looking at it. Known yet ignored, his influence can be felt in anything that deals with technology generally and, in particular, with the fact that this thing one talks about is no longer extraneously identified with the machine or the megamachine, but is interiorized and assimilated and identified as a social phenomenon, the technological phenomenon by contrast with the mere technical operation.

Thus, even in France, Ellul is not unknown. Irritatingly rubbing against the grain, he upsets the apple cart. But, in so disrupted a world as ours, where people seek only to escape from it all instead of being confronted with it, let alone with themselves, Ellul is no guru. He does not even claim to proffer some sophisticated version of religion, contenting himself with playing the role of a physician who, because he has some idea of what health and its preservation is all about, is in no need whatever to lecture at his patient, but seeks to heal her.

Of course, Ellul's socio-political analysis of our technological civilization goes hand in hand with his religious investigation and his theological assessment of the human predicament. And, of course, likewise which hand leads the other is a moot question. But I would not go so far as Ellul does when, at times, he denies or, at least seems to deny that his sociology and the pessimism that adumbrates it is influenced by his theology and it fundamentally inalienable optimism, or vice versa. There is, actually, no need to blur the issue. And, I surmise, what Ellul himself means, when he contends that his sociology owes nothing to his theology, or the other way around, is simply that one needs no specifically Christian equipment in order to assess the impact of technology on the apparent depersonalization of the individual or on the no less apparent dehumanization of the social network. Still, it behooves not to forget that Ellul is too much of a Calvinist for him to overlook the final implication of that Protestant notion par excellence when it comes to social policy, namely the priesthood of all believers. A notion in whose perspective, theology does not fill its role and its task is not fulfilled by subordinating or by annexing this or that other field of inquiry. There is nothing religious that has no secular dimension, and there is nothing secular that has no religious dimension. The task of the theologian is fulfilled only to the extent that is also fulfilled the task of the sociologist – only to the extent, in other words, that, so far as Ellul is concerned, if he should be taken for a good theologian, he would not like that that was the reason he was considered a good sociologist.

Whether Ellul is as good a religious thinker as he is a socio-political analyst, or vice versa, is not the question: there is no cleavage in his thinking. But there is, I dare say, a "fault". It comes, however, not from the fact that he is fluent with either of the two Karls – Marx and Barth –, but from the fact that, unlike Marx, Barth had nothing to say about technology. It comes from the fact that, unlike Marx again, who somehow saw religion at least as an ersatz of utopia, Barth entirely evaded the issue, and its intention,

by withdrawing and isolating the Christian faith from the arena of religion altogether and sadly, I am afraid, settled for some theological Newspeak. Not that, I consequently consider Ellul to be an unconditional Barthian, on the contrary. The fact nevertheless is that Barth's influence, whether accepted or suffered, has hindered and choked Ellul's own creative approach to theological reflection, as is ultimately evidenced even by his notion of universal salvation, of which Barth himself said that it could only be taught by a fool while only the impious would not believe it. In other words, the fact is that Ellul's socio-political analysis of the technological phenomenon calls for another theological method than one borrowed from Barth, precluded as it is from coping with the problem otherwise than in terms of such classical categories as subject and object, body and soul, contemplation and action, already and not yet, etc.

Paradoxically, Ellul is therefore somehow justified in claiming that his spiritual convictions do not interfere with his sociological findings. That is, objectively speaking, he is right: his technological pessimism (so to speak) does not merely reflect the pessimistic side of his religious conviction. But, subjectively speaking, he fails to or is prevented from drawing a correlation between his ultimately theological optimism and his no less ultimate technological optimism: he does not square his statements about universal salvation with the recurrent optimism of statements like the following: "I have never said that [technology] could not be mastered." He would have needed another theological method.

Put differently, as Ellul himself is not aware, discourse about technology, funded as it is by newfangled categories, requires at least an adequate type of conceptuality than is allowed by traditional theological discourse, itself dependent on an entirely different experience of the human predicament and its world. Instead, insisting on demythologizing the world rather than the bible or, more precisely, the biblical view of the world, he won't realize that, in fact, the two belong together; that, demythologizing one without demythologizing also the other, we should be faced and stuck with the unacceptable as well as unwarranted option of secularism on the one hand and, on the other, fideism – a mesmerizing option, especially in a country like France.

In cultural terms, the French revolution of 1789 has resulted in consolidating so unilateral an understanding of secularization as to be exclusively synonymous with the expropriation of the church and the demise of Christianity. With the exception of Strasbourg and the regions of Alsace and Lorraine which still enjoy the shelter of a peculiar, legal status, France is probably, to this day, the only developed nation whose educational system has deliberately inhibited if not repressed religion. It follows that, culturally speaking, no theologian is more isolated than a French theologian, unless, like Teilhard de Chardin, who lived abroad and coined new concepts, or (though he has done neither) like Jacques Ellul, he strikes it rich in some other field of inquiry. For the same reason, most French theologians continue to labor under the weight of old-fashioned categories, remaining oblivious to the fact that atoms and molecules or neutrons and protons are not objects in the same sense as were objects previously. Is it conceivable that this difference should be considered significant enough to affect scientific discourse, while being practically shunned by the language of faith. Nor is it surprising that, besides the theologies of liberation, even particularly the so-called theol-

ogy of the death of God has cut no ice with Ellul,<sup>1</sup> in spite of the fact that, with the exception of one of its exponents, all the others had been weaned on vintage Barth.

The various stands Ellul takes with respect to society, the state or religion are thus heavily dependent upon this cultural horizon, typical of the French mind-set. A mind-set which, under the guise of the worst bureaucratic system ever devised, nonetheless prides itself on its Cartesian heritage or, actually, what's left of the caricature thereof. No administration is as impersonal, even -- the term is far from inappropriate -- clerical as the French. None is as deservingly laden with the worst connotations of *la technique*, the pyramidal structure of which, whether in social affairs or in the academic field, invariably culminates in Paris. To the medieval, clerical dichotomy of priesthood and laity has succeeded a no less clerical and equally classily division of the French mind-set between parisian and provincial. I wonder, as did Harvey Cox if I am not mistaken, whether some of Ellul's sharpest strictures levelled at *la technique* do not stem from his first-hand and exclusive acquaintance with this clerical, bureaucratic mind-set.

But then, I am equally puzzled and wonder why Ellul, who surely knows better and has known better all along, has supplied credence to the notion that technology could only fan into structures that dehumanize the social network or dislocate the human person. Even Weyembergh, though partial to Ellul, points out that in the latter's view "technology best accommodates itself with a centralized economy and an anti-democratic, authoritarian system," but hastens to observe that this view has not been "corroborated by recent developments."<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Ellul himself can on the one hand write that "technology engenders totalitarianism,"<sup>3</sup> and assert, on the other hand, that, though it is autonomous, technology nevertheless can be conquered and tamed<sup>4</sup> -- albeit through being sacralized! In other words, we are enslaved to technology, though not by technology so much as through the sacralization of technology. In other words, again, although *la technique* is autonomous, it is not immunized against being sacralized, against the sacred! Writes Ellul: "We must avoid a misunderstanding: people are absolutely not free from sacralizing or not sacralizing technology; they cannot help from making sense of life if based even on technology."<sup>5</sup> Much as he is tantalized by the sacred, Ellul keeps plowing. In 1982 he does not exclude the possibility for technology to appear at last as harbinger of a new hope for humanity, and he writes: "We are today witnessing a development which triggers a good deal of hope -- a transformation of *la Technique*. I would say that till ca 1970 technology was an unshakable power and went only one direction. It really was the system and had only one conceivable goal, growth, in every sense, in terms of power, of production, etc., though this growth was beginning to be questioned by some. Now, mutations have occurred, such as automation (to be sure it has existed for a long time, I talked about it in my first book in 1950) or computerization, can eventually alter the orientation of technology, give society a new direction."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, having made his point, Ellul feels the need even to add a complaint. He deplores that in a book Jacques Delors (now President of the European Economic Commission) has just developed theses very close to his own yet without noticing it.<sup>7</sup>

Nor will Ellul fail subsequently to stress this point. Contrary to widespread opinion, he is no enemy of technology. In fact, his attitude in this respect is not ambivalent at all.

But it is ambiguous.

And the question, then, will be: whence the source of this ambiguity? But, first, let me cite as evidence of this contention the passage, partially quoted already, from the epilogue of *Les nouveaux possédés*, published in 1973: "Now is the time more than ever, when people become enslaved to things and to other people through a religious process. It is not *la technique* which enslaves us, but the sacred which, once transferred to technology, prevents us from having a critical function in the service of human

development. It is not the State which enslaves us, though it be a centralized and a police state, but it is its sacral transfiguration (as inevitable as is that of technology) which turns our adoration towards this concatenation of bureaux ... Thus it is that religiosity, from which no one in the situation where we are is immune, is the surest agent of our alienation..."<sup>8</sup>

The ambiguity betrayed by Ellul's position clearly stems, on the one hand, from his contention that, as Barth would have it, and a host of anthropologists and assorted sociologists since Durkheim, religion is bound up with the sacred rather than with the holy and, in the last analysis, with hallowing the name of God as well as the land of promise in anticipation of the kingdom of God, i.e. with utopia; on the other hand, it stems from the fact that, in the footsteps of Barth, having thus deprived religion of its biblically legitimate utopian dimension, Ellul is logically led to minimize, even to edulcorate, the intrinsic utopianism of technology itself. This he does by claiming that, while technology desacralizes everything it touches, it inevitably remains a stooge of the sacred. But such a consideration is worth taking into account if, and only if, utopia is identified with the quest of a final solution, the very kind of solution of which the biblical notion of the kingdom or, put differently, the utopianism of biblical religion wants to be and is the constant and perennial subversion. Evidently, in accordance with biblical religion, so long as utopia means changing the world instead of changing worlds, it cannot pave the way for any final solution. Or else, it would have to thwart both nature and history, instead of assuming them while at the same time broadening their respective horizons. Utopia loses ground and becomes a bottomless pit as soon as, under its guise, is advocated a final solution. A final solution is the goal of nature or of history in the same sense that an oak tree is the goal of an acorn: it belongs to a realm where ends and means are not differentiated. Like biblical utopianism (the kingdom of God is no achievement of nature or history), technological utopianism rests on differentiated ends and means. Accordingly, utopia can only be pro-visional as well as proleptic, i.e. an anticipation. Just because it is an anticipation, utopia can only be nothing more, and must be nothing less, than an approximation.<sup>9</sup>

## NOTES

1. Cf. Maurice Weyembergh, *Entre politique et technique*, Paris 1991, p. 173.
2. Maurice Weyembergh, *Entre politique et technique*, p. 156.
3. Jacques Ellul, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siècle*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris 1954, p. 257.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Les nouveaux possédés*, Fayard, Paris 1973, p. 259; *Changer de révolution*, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1982, p. 224. Cf. Patrick Troude-Chastenot, Lire Ellul, P.U., Bordeaux n.d., p. 67, 167.
5. Jacques Ellul, *Les nouveaux possédés*, p. 259, n.1.
6. Jacques Ellul, *Les nouveaux possédés*, p. 224.
7. Jacques Delors, *La révolution du temps choisi*, Albin Michel, Paris 1980, cited by Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution*, p. 224, n.1.
8. Jacques Ellul *Les nouveaux possédés*, p. 259.
9. For further insights into utopianism and the connection between utopia, revoution, and the final solution, or artificialism and fabricabilité (that is, utopian as fabricated world order), see not only Maurice Weyembergh's *Entre politique et technique* but also his latest book on *Charles Maurras et la révolution française*, Vrin, Paris 1992.

# Ellul and Vahanian: Apocalypse or Utopia?

by Darrell J. Fasching

There is a great deal in Jacques Ellul's writings which lends justification to Maurice Weyembergh's interpretation of Ellul as totally anti-utopian, and yet, as I have argued in *The Thought of Jacques Ellul*, Ellul can only be anti-utopian by being inconsistent with himself, which in this case he is. Weyembergh argues that Ellul totally opposes human hope (*espoir*) – including all utopian hopes -- and the hope of faith (*espérance*). And yet in his best moments Ellul argues that "whoever receives the revelation of God should give heed to men's hope, not in order to tell them that they are deluded . . . not in order to take up a position of superiority, but to help them give birth to their hope. . . ."<sup>1</sup> So Ellul has argued that Christians should support others in their revolutionary hopes, seeking to rehabilitate human revolutionary hope (*espoir*) by introducing into it the hope of faith (*espérance*). If this is so, then why can't utopia be likewise rehabilitated? This is the challenge to Ellul brought about by the theology of Gabriel Vahanian.

After struggling with the theological perspectives of both Ellul and Vahanian I have come to a slightly different conclusion than that offered by Weyembergh. Although he is right to point to the impasse between them concerning the relation between technique and language, still there is more agreement between them than Weyembergh allows. My own reading of their arguments leads me to believe that this is the case because each is largely right in what he affirms and wrong in what he denies.

When all is said and done, I believe Ellul must be considered a utopian thinker. Few claims about Jacques Ellul would seem more paradoxical (that is, "contrary to appearances") than this claim. You do not have to read very far in Ellul before you discover that he considers utopian thought the primary myth of our technological civilization, whose sole function is to render human beings totally subservient to its necessities. We will put up with any dehumanization, he argues, we will accept any demand for efficiency, and give up any freedom, as long as we believe we shall be rewarded with utopia. If there is such a thing as fate or necessity in a technological society, if technology has a certain autonomy, it is because we have been seduced into surrendering ourselves to its demands in return for the promise that it will fulfill our wildest utopian dreams for comfort, for pleasure and for success.

Yet, despite this, Ellul must be categorized as a utopian thinker. Ellul's own theological ethics is oriented toward a utopian transformation of society. But that utopianism gets drowned in the rhetoric of apocalypse. Ellul's phobia about the word "utopia" has prevented him from seeing that his unique appropriation of apocalyptic tradition is utopian. In fact Ellul inverts the popular meanings of *apocalypse* and *utopia* in his own theological writings. Where the world embraces utopian hopes and fears apocalyptic scenarios, Ellul embraces apocalyptic hopes and fears utopian scenarios. This reversal is intimately tied to his distinction between the sacred and the holy. Contrary to popular usage, Ellul treats the terms "sacred" and "holy" not as synonyms but as antonyms. Thus the sacred is, for him, the reverse image of the holy. And whereas the sacred encloses society in a fixed order, the holy introduces that element of transcendence which opens society to the future.

For Ellul, utopia is an expression of the sacral imagination of our technicist society and the apocalyptic mode of thought ex-

presses the transforming power of the holy. As a sociologist, Ellul argues that the sacred is simply an inherent element in the psycho-social structure of our human world which serves to legitimate the structure of a technicist society so that it becomes totalitarian, demonic and dehumanizing. Only by breaking with the seductive allure of this sacral world, he argues, can a transcendent freedom be reintroduced into the technological city whereby it can become an anticipation of a new city - the New Jerusalem. For Ellul, the theologian, apocalyptic hope is just that hope in the Wholly Other which ruptures one's psychological and spiritual dependency on the sacral structures of this world. It is precisely that hope which is not conformed to this world and therefore able to transform the world.

The thrust of Gabriel Vahanian's theological critique of Ellul, especially in *God and Utopia*, has been precisely to chide Ellul for not recognizing that there is such a thing as a biblical form of utopianism, an iconoclastic form of utopianism which Vahanian would take to be normative.<sup>2</sup> Unlike the dualistic ideologies of apocalyptic thought which afflict "man with visions of another world. . . ." he argues, "utopia, like the kingdom, is moved by the vision of a new world, radically other than the "other world" itself. . . . Echoing, as it were the biblical view of the world as creation, utopia holds that only the *novum* is realizable, everything else being nothing but repetition. . . ."<sup>3</sup>

If Ellul shies from giving *utopianism* a positive meaning, Vahanian reacts to *apocalypticism* in a like manner, for he equates it with an ideological dualism more concerned with *changing worlds* than *changing the world*. Ellul's work, however, should serve as a reminder to Vahanian (who already acknowledges a large indebtedness to him) that biblical apocalypticism is not about *changing worlds* but precisely about *changing the world*. Ellul's understanding of the apocalyptic narrative tradition sounds suspiciously like Vahanian's understanding of the utopian narrative tradition. The problem is that Ellul fails to appreciate the utopianism of the very apocalyptic tradition which stands at the center of his thought. By the same token Vahanian fails to appreciate that Ellul's apocalypticism really does draw on the authentic utopianism of the biblical tradition. Despite their seeming opposition, it does not seem to me that the disagreement between them is unbridgeable. For Vahanian's eschatological *novum* like Ellul's *apocalypse of the eschaton* is nothing other than the presence of the Wholly Other in the here and now which calls into question the sacred order of "reality" in order to make all things possible and all things new.<sup>4</sup>

In Vahanian's view, the deliverance of technological utopianism from its propensity to become an ideology depends on an ecclesial revolution as the foundation for a cultural revolution.<sup>5</sup> But for the church to engage in this revolution, which could open up the language of technological utopianism to its eschatological possibilities, it must first of all *appropriate* the language of technological utopianism so that it might *expropriate* technological utopianism as a language of faith.

Far more than the medieval world which imagined the human in terms of nature, our contemporary technological civilization is open to the linguistic utopianism of the Gospel narratives. For both the Gospels and technological utopianism speak of the human through the language of new creation. It remains only for utopianism to be linked with the biblical eschatological experi-

ence of the holy, Vahanian argues, in order to give birth to the *novum*, a genuinely new creation of the human in which we discover our utopianism in the image and likeness of the God who has no image.<sup>6</sup> The Christ event, the word made flesh, is but the affirmation of the coming of the human, the affirmation that human destiny is tied to neither nature nor history nor the utopian techniques through which it comes into being but to the eschaton.<sup>7</sup> In Christ the human person is not trapped in a "human nature" but experiences a truly utopian invitation to become a new creature, here and now.<sup>8</sup> One should not be misled however, for Vahanian is not identifying biblical utopianism with technological utopianism but relating them to each other dialectically. "Utopia is not the kingdom. Utopia is to the kingdom as nature is to creation, or as history is to redemption, or, simply as the flesh is to the spirit. If there is a relationship between them, it is one of radical otherness. . . ."<sup>9</sup>

As I struggled with these seemingly opposing viewpoints I began to believe that Ellul and Vahanian each had grasped half of a Janus-faced myth which was in fact a unity -- the myth of *Apocalypse/Utopia*. What is really occurring between them is a conflict of the narrative imagination in which for Ellul the language of apocalypse is understood as the language of transcendence or the holy through which all things can be transformed whereas utopian language is viewed as a sacral ideological language which legitimates the technician *status quo*. For Vahanian the categories are reversed: apocalyptic language is sacral and ideological, and utopian language is the language of the holy/transcendence which calls all things into question so as to make all things new. Putting two and two together, I realized that there were in fact two modes of linguistic imagination focused on the terms "Apocalypse/Utopia." The first expresses the non-dialectical dualism of a narrative imagination under the influence of the experience of the sacred which divides all things into the irreconcilably opposing categories of sacred and profane. The second expresses the dialectical relationship of the holy and the secular. For the holy, as both Ellul and Vahanian insist, desacralizes and hence secularizes the sacred, opening up the human world to the possibility of transcendence and transformation.

Ellul and Vahanian use the terms "apocalypse" and "utopia" respectively to express the transforming power of the holy while each suspects the other of using the opposing term in its sacral form. But as expressions of the holy, these terms are not opposites but a dialectical unity. It was reading Karl Mannheim, one of the founding fathers of the sociology of knowledge, which enabled me to grasp the dialectical unity of apocalypse and utopia. Mannheim constructs a very interesting argument, in his book *Ideology and Utopia*, for the roots of utopianism in the apocalyptic tradition and of the importance of that tradition for the making of history.<sup>10</sup> Utopias, he argues, introduce a tension into the present order of things which is creatively disruptive. Without this tension we would live "in a world in which there is never anything new, in which all is finished and each moment is a repetition of the past. . . . With the relinquishment of utopias, man would lose his will to shape history and therewith his ability to understand it."<sup>11</sup>

In tracing the history of utopianism, Mannheim identifies the apocalyptic tradition as the most important source for this kind of radical utopianism. He cites the apocalypticism of Thomas Munzer as an example and argues that this kind of apocalypticism embodies a radically utopian mode of transformative consciousness "in which the impossible gives birth to the possible and the absolute interferes with the world and conditions actual events."<sup>12</sup> This utopian consciousness introduces an attitude of "tense expectation" in which "the promise of the future which is to come is not . . . a reason for postponement, but merely a point of orientation, something external to the ordinary course of events from where he (i.e., an individual) is on the lookout, ready to take the leap." Such apocalyptic utopianism "sees revolution as a value

in itself, not as an unavoidable means to a rationally set end. . . ."<sup>13</sup> For Mannheim, apocalyptic consciousness expresses the utopian mentality which is revealed in those "hopes and yearnings" which give rise to an inherently iconoclastic mode of consciousness "incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs." It is this mode of consciousness which inspires those actions which tend to "shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of things prevailing at the time. . . . [and] break the bonds of the existing order."<sup>14</sup>

Mannheim's analysis makes it possible to see both Ellul and Vahanian as sharing the same narrative tradition. Mannheim's analysis of apocalyptic and utopian themes offers the opportunity of dispelling the illusion of fundamental disagreement between Ellul and Vahanian. If Vahanian would acknowledge that there is more than one kind of apocalyptic narrative and Ellul that there is more than one kind of utopian narrative the seeming chasm between them might yet be bridged. What both wish to deny is a sacral/ideological use of these terms and what both wish to affirm is the transformative power of the holy.

There are signs that Ellul is moving closer to Vahanian if not vice versa. After a long history of using the word only in a negative fashion, in *The Humiliation of the Word*, for the first time Ellul refers to "utopias" as belonging "to the order of truth . . . known and created by the word" (p. 230).<sup>15</sup> And in a public address of the Society for the Philosophy of Technology conference on Democracy and Technology at the University of Bordeaux in 1989, Ellul argued that the only hope for the future lay in the direction of a "utopianism" in the sense that "my good friend Vahanian uses that term." When I asked him about this statement after the speech, he said that although he resisted at first, he had gradually become convinced by Vahanian's utopianism. However, for this to really become an integral theme in his theological work he would have to completely rethink the relation between language and technique. In that respect Weyembergh is absolutely right about the difference between Vahanian and Ellul.

What the argument between Vahanian and Ellul helps us understand is that the popular "mythological" meanings of the terms "apocalypse" as cataclysmic total destruction and "utopia" as an ideal world of total perfection are really fragments and distortions of a biblical eschatology which underlies the historical imagination of Western civilization. The result of this fragmentation has been to break apart the dialectical unity of *realism* and *transcendence* in the biblical proclamation resulting in the non-dialectical dualistic opposition of *apocalypse* and *utopia* -- expressing a pessimistic *Procrustean* realism on the one hand and a naive *Protean* optimism on the other. The one expresses a cosmological orientation which tells us "that's the way things are and we can't change them." The other reflects an anarchical existentialist orientation which insists "we can become whoever we wish to become and do whatever we wish to do." These fragments are the result of dismantling of the dialectical unity of biblical eschatology which holds *realism* and *openness to transcendence and transformation* in a tense unity -- one which enables those eschatological holy communities which embody this unity to be a fermenting and transforming utopian presences *in* but not *of* the world.

## NOTES

1. *To Will and To Do*, (Pilgrim Press, 1969), p. 81.
2. See Gabriel Vahanian, *God and Utopia: The Church in a Technological Civilization* (NY: Seabury Press, 1976).
3. Vahanian, *God and Utopia*, p. 38. The *novum* referred to here should be understood as that which is genuinely new and not just the kind of change which is superficial. The *novum* clearly must

(Fasching Notes Continued on page 14.)

# Book Reviews

*Lire Ellul: introduction a l'oeuvre socio-politique de Jacques Ellul*, by Patrick Troude-Chastenet (Presses Universitaires, Bordeaux, no date).

For this sensible analysis amid its careful documentation of Ellul's impressive work, Patrick Troude-Chastenet ought to be commended and, no doubt, deserves heartfelt considerations on the part of anyone conscious of the risks involved in such an undertaking. Especially, he ought to be commended for filling a crying gap, and for doing so without adulating Ellul in the least, yet in such a way that Ellul, precisely because he is not courted, should be pleased. Whatever the reason, no major book, collective or not, had been devoted to the wide-ranging corpus of Ellul's writings whether as a professional thinker or as a thoughtful social worker among dropouts and other juvenile delinquents. The task laid before Chastenet was forbidding. From beginning to end, however, he performs it with unflinching talent, though his theological assessment, insofar as I am concerned, betrays an approach which, for being that of a non-specialist, tends to limn a more dualistic picture of Ellul's religious stance than is actually warranted. Be that as it may, in the main, Chastenet shows that Ellul is not the prophet of doom he has been claimed to be and that nothing is more erroneous than the image of a systematic, puritan nay-sayer who despises the world, let alone technology. He moreover succeeds and provides us with an accurate and well-balanced interpretation of a challenging if at times impetuous pattern of thought.

Under the heading -- a telling one right from the start -- of "Corrupting the World," the first part of *Lire Ellul* (On reading Ellul) confronts us with the emergence of technology as the fundamental element and determining factor of social as well as human development if not progress. (Incidentally, Ellul adheres to the distinction between *technique* and *technology*, exclusively reserving the latter for the discourse about technique as evidenced, e.g., by the contrast between *le système technicien* and *le bluff technologique*.) Politics as well as the social reality in all its aspects suffer the impact of propaganda. In a *société technicienne*, propaganda plays the role of no more than a makeshift meant to help people bear the unbearable. At an increasingly onerous cost, however: it corrupts the very core of what makes us human, namely language itself. As a result, overtly or covertly, regardless of regime, the state itself becomes more and more monolithic, and is increasingly, characterized by practices of spiritual oppression.

To some extent, this may be so. But, to my mind, it makes it obvious that, in and through technology, Troude-Chastenet apprehends in no way any eclosion of some new type of religiosity but, rather, even a fatal step in our alienation from religion - construed however in strictly traditional terms.

Not inappropriately does therefore the second part of Chastenet's book focus on the question: "Salvation, it is impossible?" Examining how Ellul's thought bounces back and forth between two of the hardest facts of life, he shows how life, if it seeks a way out, as it does even under the imperialism of technology, points to the necessity of a revolution, and how, on the other hand, it remains hemmed in by the very impossibility of this same revolution - unless...

Unless, somewhat "recovering hope," as the third part suggests, people and above all Christians have as grains of salt or, to change the metaphor, as grains of sand in the mechanism of the techno-

logical system. Ellul has always claimed he was an anarchist. "Dissenter" would have been a better term, but no such term, though it comes from Latin, has a French equivalent, regrettably, if only because it even has a smack of utopian relish in a way that "anarchy" doesn't quite convey, at least not in its usual French connotations. Anyhow, there can be no doubt that Ellul is an iconoclast. But, on religious grounds, an iconoclast only longs for the City of God and, longing for it, builds the only city he actually knows how to build - the City of man: neither Babel nor the Kingdom of God on earth, but the promise of a kingdom open to all so long as faith is not, Ellul himself ultimately avers, surrendered to and exhausted by its traditional exclusivistic soteriological dimension.

Finally, given the overall quality of Chastenet's presentation of Ellul's thought, I am puzzled by his bibliography, whose logic I fail to perceive. Besides its curious arrangement of rubrics, it omits apparently the other major books published (by a single author) on Jacques Ellul: *The Thought of Jacques Ellul: a Systematic Exposition* by Darrell J. Fasching, Edwin Mellen Press, New York & Toronto 1981; *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul* by David Gill, The American Theological Library Association and The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1984.; *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul* by Daniel Clendenin University Press of America, 1987 and *Technique, Discourse and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* by David Lovekin, Lehigh University Press, 1991.

Gabriel Vahanian, Université de Strasbourg

*The Social Creation of Nature* by Neil Evernden, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

Technique may be a problem for humans because it distorts our natural rhythms, separates us from a more natural world, and disturbs the ecology. But what is nature? How would we feel at home in a more natural world? Evernden is an environmentalist writing in defense of a nature from which he claims we have long been alienated. He sees little progress in the conservation movement, heralded by Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, thirty years ago. Environmentalism has been disappointing, he claims, yielding little, and providing solutions which tend to objectify nature; we manage it, protect it or devise new techniques to save it. Like Ellul, he faults our discourse. We have to begin again, ask new questions, expose the obstacles in our language and see the world of nature anew.

Evernden's entry into this discussion is via the concept of pollution. Why do the environmentalist and the industrialist, for example, not agree on the facts of pollution? They disagree, he claims, because pollution is a construction, requiring a prior concept of ordering, and the industrialist and the environmentalist differ on what constitutes proper order, and what constitutes the good life. We mistakenly assume that pollution, nature, and the ecological balance are all observable neutral phenomena. To prove otherwise Evernden posits a hypothetical alien ecologist with selective amnesia. If such a person were to observe our world he or she might mistake our anomalous species for the destructive unstable budworm, which destroys mightily, giving other species a turn at rejuvenating, and then recedes for a generation. Examples of domination, harmony and the budworm are all found in nature, rendering any transfer of values from nature to the human domain problematic. In fact, Evernden argues that nature is a socially constructed reality, which we then posit as a given, and a repository for all our favourite values and ideologies. Similarly, from the point of view of semiotics, nature is a myth. It is perceived "as nature, as a 'factual system' when it is actually a 'semiological system.'" This is how we come to confuse history and nature, seeking absolute norms in the nature we falsely believe lies beyond or underneath history, when in fact nature has been created historically. At this point his argument can be confusing. Evernden does not see 'nature' as a word with reference only to other words and to language. There is something out there, and it is living. He wants us to know and feel that living out-there wildness. But his underlying realism is sometimes lost in the turns of his "spiral" argument about construction. All language, of course, is constructed, but few concepts have quite the authoritative weight nature does. The many meanings and values associated with nature render it a very problematic standard, even a dangerous one to us, he argues, and leave nature itself very vulnerable.

Evernden traces the history of the construction of nature from the discovery of "everything" by the Greeks, and its first taming by being named. Nature then came to mean everything but us and God. Nevertheless, the medieval view of nature, inherited from remnants of the Aristotelian, Platonic and Christian views, was one resplendent with notions of vitality and otherness, overflowing with the "signatures" of God, its creator. It was not ours to tame or to own. Nature could be known only empathically. This was a type of vitalistic monism.

With the Renaissance, and then Cartesian dualism, came the revolution which brought the modern view of nature, as object, as necessity, as the repository of truth because it can be empirically studied, as constituted of visual surfaces, and as increasingly dead and lifeless. Evernden refers to this nature as Nature, a terrain "devoid of human involvement," knowable not by intuition and empathy, but by the elite technically or mathematically trained few. The essentially human was defined over against

Nature, though our bodies might be part of it. The human self became the sole repository of all values, life, vitality and free will. We became lonely observers, and a massive education system was required to socialize new humans into the objective stance. What Evernden is talking about, of course, is the rise of the modern scientific epistemology, which he admits has been immensely fruitful. His polemic points out the cost of this revolution, a cost he thinks we are only now beginning to feel lethally.

Evernden details Leonardo's role in popularizing this revolution. Perspective, the collaboration of mathematics and art, enables us to see the world more realistically than ever before. Seeing comes to be construed as believing and knowing. A visual understanding of reality was born, and transferred to the grammar of our discourse. "Pushing, pulling and seeing what happens, ...are not a means to knowledge; they are knowledge." Evernden laments that "if we contrast the rich and heterogenous world that was the experience of the medieval with our strictly sanitized collection of empirical objects, we can appreciate the price paid for our deference to social consensus as the sole legitimator of reality."

This is a strong claim. Does he really want us to return to a medieval view of nature? And is this medieval construction compatible with maintaining vast populations? Is he asserting the superiority of the medieval construction or suggesting that we assimilate both the modern and the medieval natures? On what grounds does he or do we choose between constructions? These issues are not fully explained in the text, though part of the answer to the last question lies in the next section, when he details how more recently the dualism which bolsters this world view has begun to collapse. Neurobiology, for example, has examined the brain, a part of Nature, and found no consciousness, the part exempt from Nature. We have been swallowed up into Nature, the dualism dissolved, and a materialistic monism has emerged. Evernden claims that we don't really want this slow suicide of the self, and hence, there must be something wrong with the whole construction which leads to such a point. "The only way to get off our own dissecting table is to admit the fiction," he says.

In the contemporary world, in trying to overcome what Evernden calls the "fragile division" between ourselves and Nature we tend to use two strategies, he argues. In one we deal with Nature by claiming that we are really like Nature, the nature-as-object position. Or we posit that Nature is really like us, the nature-as-self position. Both attitudes lead to the management, saving, or protecting of the objective Nature.

What then is the solution? Like Bellah in *Habits of the Heart*, Evernden argues that we have lost an old vocabulary. Most of us are no longer able to view nature as we once did, except as pre-literate children, and hence we are not able to approach the environmental crisis effectively. "To encounter the other beings as other, as living subjects of significance, requires some loosening of the conceptual bindings of nature so that subjectivity can flow back in, like water to a scorched garden." Children, he claims, experience the shock of otherness, alive out there, but this appreciation is gradually eroded with age; the experience of water gives way to the concept "water" and finally to "H<sub>2</sub>O." Wonder, wildness, and stories are the answer. Wildness is the characteristic of nature which is destroyed by taming, saving, and managing.

Evernden gives us a great deal in this lucidly written book to think about, and there are many points at which his argument steps on the familiar terrain of the natural or human versus technique, the grammar of our discourse and the ensnarement of a visually oriented society. But there remain nagging problems with his argument and his conclusions. The first is that mentioned above. How does one choose between constructions of reality? On what basis is one more true than the other? Does he want us just to "loosen" our "conceptual bindings," or to discard our modern thinking altogether? How does a more vitalistic apprehension of nature coexist with the modern mind, and with sup-

porting massive populations? Evernden hints that we are headed to destruction so long as we keep managing, and dealing with nature, even in the guise of protecting it or ourselves, and hence we must get out of our conceptual cages soon. But the reasoning is not explicit.

The second problem is that the final section adopts the language of "otherness" and "other." Is nature then to be the new divinity, to be both creation and creator? How many new religions and sects will emerge from a nature mysticism which is not historically informed. One thinks of the balance Schleiermacher might bring to this conclusion, with his beginnings in self-consciousness, proceeding to consciousness of otherness, of a world in which we are both passive and active, and finally and logically to consciousness of absolute dependence and of God.

Lastly, Evernden wants us to develop a new language, to break out of the language games which surround and envelop us. He wants us to bear witness to a new way of regarding ourselves in the world by growing and appreciating weeds, and developing a new grammar and a new language game. But what will become of nature in the meantime? Surely Nature must sometimes be saved, if we get the chance, while we await the utopian or eschatological future when all of us "acquire the vocabulary needed to accommodate wildness and [to] extinguish the technological flashfire of planetary domestication."

*Nicola Hoggard Creegan,  
North Carolina Wesleyan College*

---

Fasching Notes (Cont.)

not be equated with some ideology of progress. On the contrary *novum* suggests "new creation," new beginnings, the grace or forgiveness which enables one to start afresh. It approximates what Ellul would characterize as the eruption of the apocalyptic or eschatological end (i.e., God) here in this present moment which gives birth to a transcending and transforming freedom.

4. Vahanian tends to treat "apocalypse" and "eschatology" as terms with opposing meanings which one must choose between, whereas Ellul tends to virtually equate these terms.

5. *God and Utopia*, p. 92.

6. *God and Utopia*, p. 137.

7. *God and Utopia*, pp. 45, 46, 54.

8. *God and Utopia*, p. 71.

9. *God and Utopia*, p. 137.

10. Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia*, (New York: Harcourt, Bruce & World, 1936). See especially chapter four, "The Utopian Mentality."

11. *Ideology and Utopia*; pp. 262-263.

12. *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 213.

13. *Ideology and Utopia*, p. 217.

14. *Ideology and Utopia*, pp. 192 & 199.

15. *The Humiliation of the Word*, Eerdmans, 1985, p. 230.

## Narrative Theology After Auschwitz From Alienation to Ethics

by Darrell J. Fasching

A critique and reconstruction of Christian theology and ethics in the light of Auschwitz through a dialogue with the Jewish narrative tradition of *Chutzpah* (i.e., audacity). Fasching proposes a shared ethic of audacity in defense of the dignity of the stranger as a response to the threats of our techno-bureaucratic world.

ISBN 0-8006-2531-7, 192 pages, paper, \$12.95

### FORTRESS PRESS

426 South Fifth Street  
Box 1209  
Minneapolis, MN 55440

1-800-328-4648

## The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima Apocalypse or Utopia ?

by Darrell J. Fasching

A critique of technological civilization in the light of Auschwitz and Hiroshima using a narrative ethics approach. Although narrative ethicists have typically argued that it cannot be done, Fasching proposes a cross cultural ethic of human dignity, human rights and human liberation grounded in the convergence of diverse narratives of hospitality to the stranger and the outcast. On this basis he argues for an ethical coalition of Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Gandhian Hinduism and Humanistic A-theism, to shape public policy in an apocalyptic nuclear era.

### SUNY Press,

Phone Orders 1-800-666-2211

Fax Orders 1-800-688-2877

366pages, 16.95 Paper, 49.50 Hardcover