

The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

July 2002 Issue #29

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Berkeley, California USA

Rethinking Ellul's Theory on the Role of Technology

From the Editor

In this Issue, Dell deChant uses Ellul to critique American society. He focuses on consumerism in the United States through that fabric of American life known as its annual festivals. While utilizing Ellul to critique a specific culture, the audience and the problem are understood to be far-reaching and multi-national. One country's public celebrations become a laboratory for fulfilling the *Forum's* purpose, that is, critiquing technological civilization.

In previous issues of *The Ellul Forum*, we have used Ellul's framework to reflect on a particular event – September 11, 2001. Through Ellul we have examined Christian anarchy, communications technology, and human rights. In all these case, the particular illumined the general. As with this Issue, the vitality of scholarship in Ellul's legacy becomes transparent.

Dell deChant's essay and Darrell Fasching's response have the added benefit of interrogating the adequacy of a major component of Ellul's theory. DeChant disagrees with Ellul's primacy of technique, arguing for the economy instead. While defending and clarifying Ellul's central thesis, Fasching celebrates deChant's bringing Ellul into the postmodern debate. Members of the University of South Florida faculty in its Department of Religion, deChant and Fasching are both indebted to Ellul—especially his *New Demons*—for demonstrating how to call our age into question.

Clifford G. Christians, Editor

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About the Ellul Forum

History & Purpose

The Ellul Forum has been published twice per year since August of 1988. Our goal is to analyze and apply Jacques Ellul's thought to aspects of our technological civilization and carry forward both his sociological and theological analyses in new directions.

While *The Ellul Forum* does review and discuss Jacques Ellul, whom we consider one of the most insightful intellectuals of our era, it is not our intention to treat his writings as a body of sacred literature to be endlessly dissected. The appropriate tribute to his work is to carry forward its spirit and agenda for the critical analysis of our technical civilization. Ellul invites and provokes us to think new thoughts and enact new ideas. To that end we invite you to join the conversation in *The Ellul Forum*.

The Ellul Forum is an English-language publication but we are currently exploring ways of linking more fully with our francophone colleagues.

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Send original manuscripts (essays, responses to essays in earlier issues) to:

Clifford Christians, Editor, *The Ellul Forum*
Institute of Communications Research
University of Illinois
810 S. Wright Street, Suite 228
Urbana, IL 61801 USA

Please send both hard copy and computer disc versions, indicating the software and operating system used (e.g., Microsoft Word for Windows 98). Type end notes as text (do not embed in the software footnote/endnote part of your program).

Essays should not exceed twenty pages, double-spaced, in length.

Manuscript submissions will only be returned if you enclose a self-addressed, adequately postaged envelope with your submission.

The Ellul Forum also welcomes suggestions of themes for future issues.

Books & Reviews

Books. *The Ellul Forum* considers for review books (1) about Jacques Ellul, (2) significantly interacting with or dependent on Ellul's thought, or (3) exploring the range of sociological and theological issues at the heart of Ellul's work. We can not guarantee that every book submitted will actually be reviewed in *The Ellul Forum* nor are we able to return books so submitted.

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David W. Gill, Associate Editor, *The Ellul Forum*
363 - 62nd Street
Oakland, CA 94618

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E-mail contact: editor@ellul.org

Religiosity and the Sacred in Postmodern America

by Dell deChant

While it certainly can be maintained that American holidays have become secular events, this paper proposes that it is precisely their "secular" (materialist/ commercial/ consumerist) dimension that makes them most obviously religious events in the context of postmodern/ latecapitalist culture. Rather than being casualties of the struggle between commercial interests and traditional values for dominance in the cultural marketplace, it appears equally plausible that the loss of conventional holiday meanings may actually be the consequence of the inability of older civic and religious institutions to successfully compete in another sort of marketplace -- the marketplace of religion.

The theoretical basis for this type of understanding was initially sketched in a paper I presented at the American Academy of Religion in 1996. In that paper, I argued that contemporary American holidays (and Christmas in particular) reveal affinities with festivals of ancient cosmological cultures. In this regard, it can be observed that postmodern holidays have not so much lost their religious or cultural significance as their *transcendental* religious significance and their *traditional* cultural significance. Moreover, what is witnessed here is more of a transference rather than a loss of significance; from transcendental to cosmological, [1] in the case of religion, and from traditional to postmodern, in the case of culture. This line of inquiry represents an updating and slight reconfiguring of an argument first presented by Jacques Ellul about twenty-five years ago. [2]

The premise of this variation of Ellul's argument is that America's late-capitalist, postmodern culture is best classified as cosmological and, if so, America's holidays, as representative religious events of such a culture, necessarily manifest characteristics of a cosmological engagement with the sacred. This paper offers a sketch of the theoretic background for this sort of understanding and how it might be utilized methodologically in the analysis of contemporary culture. Although my particular focus is on American culture, and specifically its holidays, I believe the general approach outlined here is potentially applicable to other postmodern cultures -- e.g., those of Western Europe and Japan. A more detailed exposition of my methodology is offered in my forthcoming book, *The Sacred Santa* [3]

The paper is divided into five parts. The first two parts present working descriptions of religion and postmodern culture (respectively) as used in this analysis. Part three brings together the two descriptions to form a theory of religion in postmodern culture. Building on this theory, part four contains an analysis of consumption as a sacred ideal and part five briefly outlines how contemporary holidays may be understood as the functional holy days of postmodern culture. The

conclusion specifies the possible implications of this method of inquiry and analysis.

Probing the Sacred Ground of Contemporary Culture: What Is Religion?

The first and perhaps most obvious concept to explicate in the context of studies of this type is the notoriously ambiguous, yet theoretically unavoidable concept of *religion* itself. The understanding offered here is essentially functional, but only in so far as the functional approach is seen as acknowledging the legitimacy of a sacred realm as an object of human intending. The other theoretical issues dealt with in the paper, and the general line of analysis are necessarily related to this working description of religion:

Religion is about power. It mediates our relationship with the source(s) of ultimate (sacred) power by suggesting, teaching, or commanding (1) a *belief* that the ultimate truth and meaning of human life is derived from and related to an order and purpose based on or decreed by the ultimate (sacred) power (e.g. gods, God, nature, cosmic principles, social order). (2) This belief is necessarily shared by a group or *community*. (3) This belief is *maintained* because of (a) the community's participation in certain special and uniquely patterned actions either personal or communal, typically called *rituals*, and (b) special (numinous) narratives, typically called *myths*, which deal with unique persons and/or events related to the sacred concerns and elements. (4) This belief in the foundational truth and meaning of human life is understood by participants in the religion to allow them (as individuals and as a community) a certain degree of *power over material conditions* (in so far as they live and act in harmony with the ultimate power) and to supply them with *answers to ultimate questions* regarding nature and the human condition (such as death, the afterlife, evil, one's place in society, why one succeeds or fails).

Of special note here is the character and function of myths and rituals. Myths are narratives about the sacred and humanity's relationship to the sacred. Typically, these narratives are set in a primordial time of origins and depict the actions and teachings of venerated ancestors, heroes, saviors, and gods. These actions and teachings disclose both the foundational reality of life and articulate the relationship of the believer to this reality. For the believer, myths communicate truths of such profundity that they cannot be doubted; truths so fundamental

that even in the face of falsifying material and/or historical evidence the believer accepts the reality of the myth. To the degree that myths lose their radical truthfulness, they lose their primary religious function.

Myths can be divided into three classes: "meta," secondary, and tertiary. [4] The meta-myth is the master story of a culture, which articulates "the true motivating and psychological foundations of [a] civilization.... expressions of the very being of the collective and universal civilization in which we are living." [5] Secondary and tertiary myths are narratives that offer more accessible versions of meta-myth, serving to personalize, vivify, and make it immediately relevant to individuals. In their secondary and especially their tertiary forms, myths guide and motivate religious activities. In their most formal sense, such activities are called rituals.

For the believer, rituals are the formal processes through which one participates in or otherwise affirms a proper relationship to the sacred. In this regard, the "texts" that religious rituals follow are the myths of the religion, because these are the narratives that articulate the sacred realm and humanity's relationship to that realm.

In a religious sense, then, rituals and myths are intertwined in such a way that rituals reenact myths and myths illuminate rituals. Through rituals, the believer experiences the sacred realm described in myths and is brought into communion with the foundational reality of life. In a practical sense, the interrelation of myth and ritual is revealed in the relationship between mythic narratives such as the Exodus story and the ritual of Passover; the narrative of the Last Supper and the ritual of communion; or the narrative of the Buddha's enlightenment and the ritual of meditation. There is, thus, a dynamic nexus when the sacred reality disclosed in myths is fully experienced through the performance of rituals. In an analysis of New Year's festivals in the ancient world, Mircea Eliade uses the term "mythico-ritual" to characterize this synergy. [6] And as argued in *The Sacred Santa*, many contemporary American holidays reveal this same sort of mythico-ritual dynamism.

Although healthy religions routinely reveal the positive dimension of the synergy of myths and rituals, it can also be reflected negatively because the loss of plausibility for one may undermine the meaningfulness of the other. In other words, when believers begin to doubt either the radical truth of the myths or the re-creative power of the rituals, the religious significance of both may decline. Doubt of the truth of the myths leads to a weakening of the meaning and value of the rituals, just as doubt of the power of rituals causes a corresponding erosion in the plausibility of mythic verities. As such doubts become more widespread among participants, religious communities decline.

This exploration and analysis of myth and ritual is undertaken in the context of what Paul Tillich introduced and first developed under the heading of "Theology of Culture" and as further detailed in Darrell Fasching's contemporary interpretation of Tillich's method as a form of social ethics.⁷ There are two crucial elements in this approach. First, as Tillich recognized, "every culture has an inherent religious dimension, even as every religion is shaped by the culture in which it emerges [and] culture is driven by its religious 'substance,' which is the human need for meaning expressed and embodied

in its... 'ultimate concerns'"; and second, theology of culture is specified as "a critique of the religious dynamic at work in the diverse autonomous spheres of human endeavor that typify modern culture." [8] I argue that this religious dynamic is found in the myths and rituals of a culture and most explicitly in what Eliade called its mythico-ritual dynamic. [9] Following Tillich's proposal, then, as a theology of culture, my subsequent inquiry into contemporary myths and rituals can be understood as a "theological questioning of all cultural values,"¹⁰ since the myths and rituals of this culture form the religious "substance" of these values -- affirming their basis in truth and allowing experiential interaction with the reality of this truth.

As Tillich understood theology of culture to be a "critique of the religious dynamic at work in ... modern culture," in my application, the critique is of the religious dynamic at work in a postmodern culture, which is seemingly secular. It is also, necessarily, a postmodern critique. What, however, does a postmodern critique of the religious dynamic of postmodern culture look like? I think the jury is still out on this, but to my mind it involves irony, indirection, and no small bit of playfulness and humor -- at least those are elements I tried to deploy in developing the critique offered in *The Sacred Santa*. Postmodern critique aside, however, for purposes of this paper, my use of Tillich and Fasching, bring into focus two other terms that require contextual explication: "religious dynamic," and "postmodern culture." Postmodern culture will be dealt with first.

Probing the Sacred Ground of Contemporary Culture: What Is A Postmodern Culture?

My intent here is not to resolve the complex nest of issues commingled in and around the term, postmodern. The term is in extreme flux today, in part due to its magnificent popularity in both popular and academic culture. One of those ferociously alluring labels, postmodern can at once classify an incredibly vast array of cultural phenomena while simultaneously (and necessarily) defying any and all efforts to stabilize its meaning with anything close to precision. It is a term of conjure and conjecture, and ultimately, I suspect, uncertainty for many. This uncertainty may not be diminished here, although it is my hope to approach postmodernism from a new direction that brings into focus an overlooked element in the ever-expanding discussion of its meaning. For this purpose, a helpful place to begin is with Fredric Jameson's explication of postmodernism.

Jameson's theory of post-modern culture follows Ernest Mandel's thesis in his *Late Capitalism*, and in a Marxist reading, Jameson argues that cultural changes follow changes in modes of production and technology. Thus, Mandel's market capitalism corresponds to the cultural period Jameson refers to as "realism"; Mandel's monopoly capitalism corresponds to Jameson's "modernism"; and Mandel's third stage (variously termed postindustrial-, multinational-, late-, or consumer-capitalism) corresponds to Jameson's "postmodernism." [11]

Of primary interest here are Jameson's comments on changes that have occurred in both the modes of and the popular attitudes toward consumption in postmodern culture due to the impact of late capitalism's incredible capacity to produce and reproduce both material objects and images. For Jameson, late capitalism or "consumer capitalism ... is the

purest form of capitalism yet to have emerged, [which witnesses] a prodigious expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas," such as the "unconscious" through "the rise of the media and the advertising industry." [12]

In the postmodern world, "commodity production [is based on the] frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever great rates of turnover," [13] in which there is "an immense dilation of ... the sphere of commodities ... a commodity rush, our 'representations' of things tending to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves" (x). The "culture of consumption" is presented as a dynamic force, which when "unleashed" consumes persons "to the point of being unable to imagine anything else" (207). Moreover, "we are *inside* the culture of the market and ... the inner dynamic of the culture of consumption is an infernal machine from which one does not escape by the taking of thought (or moralizing positions)" (206). It offers "an infinite propagation and replication of 'desire' that feeds on itself and has no outside and no fulfillment" (206). He notes that "the force, then, of the concept of the market lies in its 'totalizing' structure'...; that is, in its capacity to afford a model of a social totality" (272).

Jameson's reading of consumption as the dominant characteristic of postmodern culture is affirmed and advanced further in the work of Jean Baudrillard. As noted by his critical exegete, Douglas Kellner, Baudrillard interprets postmodern culture as a culture of consumption in which "participation ... requires systematic purchase and organization of domestic objects, fashion and so on into a system of organized codes and models." [14] In Baudrillard's words:

We have reached the point where "consumption" has grasped the whole of life, where all activities are connected in the same combinatorial mode.... In the phenomenology of consumption, this general climatization of life, goods, objects, services, behaviors and social relations represents the perfected, "consummated" stage of evolution which, through articulated networks of objects, ascends from pure and simple abundance to complete conditioning of action and time and finally to the systematic organization of ambience, which is characteristic of the drugstores, the shopping mall, or the modern airports in our futuristic cities. [15]

Kellner further interprets Baudrillard: "The consumer ... cannot avoid the obligation to consume, because it is consumption that is the primary mode of social integration and the primary ethic and activity within the consumer society. The consumer ethic and 'fun morality' thus involve active labor, incessant curiosity and search for novelty, and conformity to the latest fads, products and demands to consume." [16] Through the acquisition of commodities, "our entire society *communicates* and speaks of and to itself." [17] Finally, and most importantly, Baudrillard "describes the consumer mentality as a form of *'magical thought* which reigns over consumption. It is a miraculous mentality which rules everyday life, a primitive mentality in the sense that is defined as a belief in the omnipotence of thoughts: in this case, belief in the omnipotence of signs." [18]

It is the premise of this paper that Jameson and

Baudrillard are correct in their interpretation of postmodern culture as fundamentally a culture of consumption; a culture defined materially and psychically in and through the consumption of objects and images. Moreover, this interpretation should be expanded and further clarified to include the observation that mere consumption does not adequately describe our relationship with objects and images. The association is more complex. Rather than simply consuming objects and images, postmodern culture can be understood as explicating meaning and value through a three-stage process, which begins (1) with the acquisition of items, (2) is clarified in the consumption of items, and finally (3) is fulfilled in the disposal of items. In critical texts, the first and third stages are typically subsumed by the second, as in Jameson, Baudrillard, Miller, and Schor, [19] but the first and third make both logical and psychical claims to equal importance. The first stage is of absolute importance for without it, actual consumption cannot occur. One must first acquire the item before the item can be consumed. In light of this, it is notable that studies of compulsive/addictive behavior indicate the compulsive/addictive subject is often driven as much (or more) by the desire to acquire as by the actual possession/consumption of objects. The final stage is equally important because it allows the process to begin again, and preferably with a higher quality object or image within a particular class of items. Although researched studies of compulsive behavior have not revealed particular interest in this feature of the process, the satisfaction of disposing of the consumed item may well equal the satisfaction of acquiring it initially, because only when the item is disposed of can the process begin again.

What is largely missing in the interpretation of the process of consumption (or the process of acquisition-consumption-disposition as argued here) is the recognition that the process may be decidedly religious in character. It is here that the work of Jacques Ellul and Eric Voegelin provide the critical hermeneutic machinery.

Probing the Sacred Ground of Contemporary Culture: What Is Religion In A Postmodern Culture?

While there are a number of good ways to go about investigating the religious character of postmodern consumerist culture, the work of Jacques Ellul and Eric Voegelin supply especially reliable theoretical instruments for such an inquiry. Unlike Jameson and Baudrillard, Voegelin and Ellul do not minimize or marginalize the religious dimension of what typically is presented as secular culture. Rather than relegating religion to its classical forms and explicating it in the context of its eclipse or its problematic status in postmodern culture, Voegelin and Ellul allow interpreters to recognize what Tillich calls the "religious dynamic" in the seemingly secular process of acquisition-consumption-disposal. More than a quarter of a century ago, first Voegelin and then Ellul developed theories that designated the religious substance of contemporary culture as something substantially different from what ordinarily passes for religion. In application, their theories recognized that the institutions typically characterized as religion may neither be the dominant material embodiments of contemporary religiosity nor the belief systems that accurately serve to mediate human relations with the sacred.

For them, those material institutions and theoretical

assemblages typically classified as religion (namely, classical and modern embodiments and sectarian variations of traditional transcendental religions [post-Vedic Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam]), face a serious challenge from alternative forms of religiosity that are at once uniquely contemporary in form and function while also being incredibly ancient in foundational structure. Ellul and Voegelin recognized that these alternative forms of religious expression are not only completely unrelated to the traditional religions with which culture is most familiar, they are the antithesis of such religions. Where traditional/normative religions are transcendental (in their locus of the divine) and anthropological (in their locus of human meaning and value), the alternative religions recognized by Ellul and Voegelin are cosmological (in their locus of the divine) and sociological (in their locus of human meaning and value).

In a description of the cultures of the ancient Near East, Peter Berger offers a helpful summary explication of the term, cosmological, as used in this context. Crediting Voegelin as the source for the term, Berger observes that in cosmological systems:

[T]he human world (that is, everything we today would call culture and society) is understood as being embedded in a cosmic order that embraces the entire universe. This order not only fails to make the sharp modern differentiation between human and non-human (or "natural") spheres of empirical reality, but, more importantly, it is an order that posits continuity between ... the world of men and the world of the gods. This continuity, which assumes an ongoing linkage of human events with the sacred forces permeating the universe is realized (not just affirmed but literally re-established) again and again in religious ritual. [20]

The cosmological worldview is the starting point for Ellul's analysis of religion in contemporary culture. Illuminating the character of the sacred in cosmological cultures, in *The New Demons* he writes: "In a world which is difficult, hostile, formidable, man...attributes sacred values to that which threatens him and to that which protects him, or more exactly to that which restores him and puts him in tune with the universe." [21] In ancient cosmological cultures, which depended on the cycles of nature and fertility of the natural environment, nature and the natural environment were the ground of the sacred -- the ground of ultimate concern, awe and fascination, dread, and enchantment.

Today, however, Ellul argues that technology has replaced nature as the sacred ground and locus of ultimate concern. As he notes: "The novelty of our era is that man's deepest experience is no longer with nature.... Hence [nature] is no longer the inciter and place of the sacred"(100). Instead, "the modern western technical and scientific world is a sacril world" and "technology is the god who saves"(70, 73). In essence, in today's world, technology has come to occupy a place analogous to that of nature in antiquity. It is the source of ultimate power and ultimate dread, what Rudolf Otto would call the *mysterium tremendus et fascinans*; and so, like nature of old, technology elicits a religious response. Importantly, although Ellul analogizes the sacred power of this era (technology) with the sacred power of traditional cosmological religions (nature), he does not equate it with the sacred power

of the traditional transcendental religions of the West (God), at least, not in a conventional manner. While Ellul is correct in his general approach, he may err when specifying technology as the sacred ground. For reasons to be discussed later, the Economy may better embody the sacred in contemporary culture.

As with the cosmological systems of yore, modern cosmological religious expressions seek to relate persons and all of culture to the source of sacred power. Just as the ancient cosmological religions utilized myth and ritual to establish and legitimate this relationship, so too does the modern cosmological religion; but because the source of sacred power has changed, so too have the myths and rituals. In Ellul's reading, where once the myths told of a sacred time of ancestors and heroes, gods of nature and fertility, today they tell of the sacred origins and mysterious processes of a technological world and one's right relationship with technology (113). Here again, Ellul's commitment to technology as the ground of the sacred may weaken his analysis of contemporary myths.

Following his specification of technology as the sacred, Ellul designates the "two fundamental myths of modern man" as "history and science"(98) and the sacred texts of the "secular religions" as *Das Kapital*, *Mein Kampf*, and *The Little Red Book*. Importantly, he also recognizes advertising as "the liturgy and the psalmody of the consumer religion"(146), but he does not quite tell us how the liturgy relates to the myths or the sacred texts. Ellul may be somewhat off the mark in designating history and science as the dominant myths of today and quite a bit off the mark in his designation of the sacred texts (although we can certainly excuse his citation of specific texts that carried more political power in the time of his writing than they do today). He comes closer to the mark in citing advertising as the liturgy of the consumer religion, but his failure to clearly explain how the liturgy relates to the myths points up a fundamental problem in his analysis.

Consumption as a religious expression is not legitimated (mythically) by history and science, and while its liturgy may well be advertising, this liturgy seems significantly disconnected from Ellul's sacred technology -- notwithstanding his own observation that it would not be difficult to "show how it [advertising] is planted in the sacred and in the religious structure" (146). Rather than history and science being the dominant myths of today, we might look to narratives that articulate the meaning and order of life in a world dominated by the Economy -- perhaps focusing on narratives of economic success and material acquisition. The delivery system for these myths is the mass media, with television being the primary vehicle.

In the case of ritual, for Ellul, it is political activity, for politics is the process through which citizens participate in the sacred work of the state, which mediates their engagement with technology. In fact, in chapter six of *The New Demons*, Ellul offers a rather elegant argument supporting his claim that politics is the religion of the contemporary world. As noted above, the sacred texts of today are political texts; and, looking more closely, Ellul finds messiahs (for example, the proletariat, in Marxism), theories of resurrection (of the race and the Volk in Nazism), millennialism (as with the Chinese cultural revolution), dogmas (Marxist theory), clergy, and heretics. Of course, there is also worship and liturgy; these are the great political festivals, such as those at Munich and Nuremberg or

"Chinese assemblies of Tien Am Mem." Curiously, and somewhat inaccurately, I believe, Ellul finds these political religions to correspond perfectly with Christianity (189), and their modification from radical movements to "guarantors of the established order" (circa the mid-1970s) to be analogous to the modification of Christianity when it became politically successful (196-7). Although his primary focus is on totalitarian states, he observes: "there is a sacralizing of all political activity elsewhere, in the liberal democratic, bourgeois and capitalist countries" (197). He does not support or develop this observation, but it seems that this could be done easily enough, following his thesis. Especially keen is his analysis of the ritualistic function of politics in the technological society. As he writes:

The political behavior of the modern citizen makes manifest the sacred of the state, and the fact that the participating citizen is endowed with an exciting grandeur. Politics has become the place of final truth, of absolute seriousness, of radical divisions among men, of the separation of good from evil In the end it is there [in the political domain] that people experience the deepest conviction that everything is at stake. (198)

Thus, as with the source of sacred power and the myths that illuminate it, the religious rituals that relate persons to this power are decidedly different from those of traditional religion. But is Jacques Ellul correct? I think he is, but only up to a point.

Like Baudrillard, whom he cites, Ellul observes: "Consumption ... is no longer a materialistic fact. It has become the meaning of life"(144). And he does recognize a distinctive religious quality to consumption. Still, for Ellul, politics functions as the decisive form of religious expression in technological societies, and these political religions are presented as essentially variations on Christianity, a transcendental religion. [22]

Voegelin, for his part, also sees modern political movements as religions. [23] In his analysis of contemporary culture and his reading of politics as religion, Voegelin, like Ellul, recognizes that the fundamental impulse of such cultures is harmonial and integrative, and like Ellul, he cites Soviet Marxism and Nazism in this regard. What Voegelin does, and Ellul does not (at least not thoroughly or convincingly), is recognize the similarities between these and other contemporary social and political systems and the cosmological religions of antiquity. [24] In his words:

The self-understanding of a society as the representative of cosmic order originates in the period of the cosmological empires in the technical sense, but it is not confined to this period. Not only does cosmological representation survive in the imperial symbols of the Western Middle Ages or in continuity into the China of the twentieth century; its principle is also recognizable where the truth to be represented is symbolized in an entirely different manner. In Marxian dialects, for instance, the truth of cosmic order is replaced by the truth of a historically immanent order. [25]

In ancient cosmological cultures, religion functioned to integrate society and internal social structures with the

cosmos and the immediate natural environment. It also served to maintain collective unity in the society. In fact, and in distinction to contemporary transcendental religions, religion was not a discrete institution in these cultures. It simply was, and through myth and ritual it affirmed and acted out (in a heightened and intensified sense) the truth that the way things were, was the way they should be. For these cultures, it was ought.

Like Ellul, Voegelin clearly recognizes that contemporary culture evinces this same sort of worldview. He also misdiagnoses the religious character of this culture by looking to politics as the religious institution that typifies this worldview. Again, like Ellul, he nicely analyzes the structures of politics and other cultural institutions as religious in character, but then, despite what would seem to be his own overwhelming evidence, he concludes that these institutions are Gnostic -- dependent on a mystical sort of salvific knowledge about history and human destiny. This is no more satisfying or accurate than Ellul's efforts to analogize these institutions to Christianity. And although Voegelin labored long and hard to make this argument, ancient Gnosticism itself was, at best, minimally cosmological, while in Voegelin's own presentation, contemporary Gnosticism is clearly cosmological, with myths of history and progress serving to illuminate the sacred realm and political movements serving the religious function of integrating persons and whole societies with this realm. Voegelin's much disputed "Gnostic thesis" is probably the greatest flaw in his far-reaching and highly regarded inquiry into the order and process of history. How much better it would have been had he forgone the problematic Gnostic thesis altogether, and expanded his brief and passing analogies of contemporary culture with cosmological civilizations into a working argument.

Despite their flaws, Ellul and Voegelin, when used together in a complementary fashion, supply what was missing in Jameson and Baudrillard -- the basis for an analysis of the religious dimension of contemporary culture. The question remains, however, what is the proper way to interpret this dimension? This is a fundamental question, because if Ellul and Voegelin are correct about the cosmological character of contemporary Western culture (and it is the presumption of this paper that they are), then the religious expression of this culture is cosmological and so the rituals and myths of this culture should reveal characteristics of a cosmological engagement with the sacred. It is here that the Ellul-Voegelin theory seems to fall apart, for although they both seem to strongly suggest that the essence of contemporary culture is cosmological (not withstanding their clumsy attempts to Christianize or Gnosticize specific religious expressions), they fundamentally misdiagnose the religious dimension itself by looking to politics rather than to a more clearly cosmological phenomenon -- consumption. Ellul and Voegelin, thus, need to be linked with Jameson and Baudrillard. This is what I attempt to do in developing a theoretical basis for the study of religion in postmodern culture presented in *The Sacred Santa*. In short, I bring Ellul-Voegelin together with Jameson-Baudrillard -- which might well have troubled the former pair of thinkers. How this somewhat paradoxical combination works can now be sketched.

The Idea of Sacred Consumption

The central problem with designating politics as the religious dimension of contemporary culture is found in the failure of politics to generate sustainable representative myths and associated rituals. If what we are dealing with in the postmodern era is a cosmological culture, politics does not offer a reasonable approximation of religion because the myths and rituals of political reality lack the sort of massive plausibility and culturally unifying dynamic demanded of the religious expressions of such cultures. While Ellul is accurate in recognizing the quasireligious role of consumption, his designation of politics as the process through which moderns "manifest the sacred," experience "exciting grandeur," and find the basis of "final truth" simply overstates the religious function of politics. Today, politics is typically dismissed as a charade at the level of popular culture and its substance (the quest for and maintenance of social power) tends not to generate community-sustaining myths and rituals, but instead, communitydestroying narratives and socially disorienting activities, often of the most disconcerting type.

The search for the religious character of postmodern culture must therefore lead elsewhere, and the elsewhere to which it leads is back to Jameson and Baudrillard and their carefully articulated study of the social function of commodity consumption. Following Baudrillard (and entirely in the context of Jameson), Kellner observes:

[T]he consumer ... cannot avoid the obligation to consume, because it is consumption that is the primary mode of social integration and the primary ethic and activity within the consumer society. The consumer ethic and "fun morality" thus involve active labor, incessant curiosity and search for novelty, and conformity to the latest fads, products and demands to consume." [26]

In this regard (to the degree that he follows Jameson and Baudrillard), Ellul is absolutely correct when he writes that "consumption ... is no longer a materialistic fact. It has become the meaning of life"; but he errs in not recognizing that consumption, as the "meaning of life," is (much more so than politics) revealed to be the basis of ultimate legitimation of individuals and society as a whole. Through consumption, which begins with ritual acquisition, one gains significance in the cosmic scheme of existence by engaging in a sacred activity and actually penetrating the sacred realm itself. Thus, rather than technology serving as the sacred ground of contemporary culture, it is the Economy; and rather than politics serving as the religious mediation of sacred reality, it is consumption, or more accurately, the experience of acquisition-consumption-disposition.

Using the description of religion given earlier as a guide, consumption may now be described as that which relates persons to the sacred (Economy) through the shared myths and rituals of a community, which, in the case of cosmological religion, is an entire culture. Religion is the phenomenon that harmonizes individual and collective activities and integrates culture as a whole with the order and process of the sacred (Economic) realm. In cosmological systems, this phenomenon is not isolated in discrete institutions, but rather, it is embedded in the collective beliefs of the entire culture. These beliefs give

order, guidance, and legitimation to culture as a whole and its residents specifically. It is that which articulates one's right relationship with the sacred and reveals the cosmic meaning of existence, which is also the culturally normative way of life and living. The Sanskrit term and Hindu religious concept *dharma* (sacred/social duty), perhaps best approximates this notion.

Thus, if the order and process (or order-process) of the Economy can be read as the ground of the sacred, then religion in its cosmological form and function is the interrelated, comprehensive, and incredibly complex collection of cultural beliefs and practices that explain and motivate one's right relationship with the Economic order and its process. This right relationship is illuminated and vivified in culturally embedded myths. Such myths must be at once believed as elemental (unquestioned) truths of existence. This, by the way, is true of all myths, whether cosmological or transcendental, but it is not true of Ellul's myths of history and science and Voegelin's similar myths of history and progress, which seem to function mythically only in some sort of abstract, academic manner. Rather than myths of history, science, or progress, the myths that relate postmoderns to the sacred realm of the Economy are the much more vital, robust economic narratives of late capitalism.

The paradigmatic model of these narratives can be referred to as a meta-myth. [27] As such, it is the overarching story that communicates the culture's sacred ideal. It is the myth that contains and generates all other myths and to which all other myths in some way refer. In principle and (ritual) practice, the great meta-myth of postmodern culture is the myth of success and affluence, gained through a proper relationship with the Economy, and revealed in the everexpanding material prosperity of society and through the ever-increasing acquisition and consumption of products by individuals. From this meta-myth, all other (more accessible, relative, and domestic) myths derive.

Although the meta-myth is seldom articulated explicitly, the secondary and tertiary myths it spawns are communicated in narratives derived from popular culture and told as much through images as words. Secondary myths are narratives about the masters of business and finance; the stars of movies, sports, and the music industry; persons who win lotteries, make fortunes e-trading, win gameshows--and then "live large" as a consequence of their success. They are the stories of Bill Gates, Michael Jordan, Madonna, Shaquille O'Neal, Tom Hanks, Jody Foster, the person on TV we never heard of who receives the check for millions of dollars, or the one who catches some record-breaking home run ball. Most commonly, secondary myths are spun out in the endless round of talk-shows, sports broadcasts, and to a lesser extent sitcoms and sitdrams. But they also are communicated through news reports, supermarket tabloids, mainstream periodicals, and all the media instruments of culture. Each and all of these stories, in their own way, constantly tell and retell the meta-myth -- the myth of material success and achievement, gained through mastery of the mysteries of the Economy. Besides these stories are the wide range of tertiary myths. These generally tend to focus on representative persons from the public at large and reveal how they too participate in the sacred reality of prosperity and affluence through personal rituals of acquisition and consumption.

Like the myths of any era, the myths of contemporary

America are the stories its citizens know best, that they listen to most closely, tell to one another, and never tire of hearing. They want to be like the heroes in the myths, they want to experience the world as the stars experience it; see as they see, live as they live, do what they do, and, in some way, consume as they consume. Stories of history, science, and progress are not in this category; they are academic explanations, theoretic maneuvers. Religious myths are much more vital than these. So too are religious rituals.

As noted earlier, rituals engage religious participants with the sacred realm disclosed by the myths. In their most distinctive cosmological form, these rituals are massive collective experiences that enthrall and enchant the whole of culture and serve to integrate persons and the most important activities of their everyday commonsense world with the sacred order. In postmodern culture, the rituals that integrate citizens with the myths are those activities that allow them to experience a degree of mastery over the mysteries of the Economy; activities that are luminous witness to their own material success and achievement. As the recently popular American TV commercial affirmed: "If I could be like Mike [Michael Jordan]," I would consume a particular commodity. So, to be like Mike, I acquire, consume, and dispose of the product. Then, I acquire another. In this way, I am like Mike, the hero of the myth. I hear the narrative of what the mythic heroes acquire, consume, dispose of: houses, cars, boats; I see the clothes they wear and/or advertise; I learn about the foods and beverages they consume. They are consumers too, and the grandest consumers of all. To be like them, to be close to the sacred world they have mastered, I too consume -- as often as I can, in as many ways as I can, and preferably I consume products that are like those that they consume, as well. In this way, citizens of postmodern culture are ritually integrated with the sacred order articulated in their myths and, as is typical of cosmological cultures, the highest form of this ritual integration occurs when the entire culture shares in events of consumption.

In the context of this analysis, it can be said that Ellul and Voegelin err not in their designation of certain elements in contemporary culture as cosmological, but rather in their specification of both the sacred realm and the religious dimension of this culture. In short, neither understands it quite "cosmologically" enough.

Technology is not the sacred ground because, to use Ellul's terms, it lacks the requisite capacity to "threaten," "protect," "restore," and "put [us] in tune with the universe." While it is easy enough to grant that technology can do these things to some extent, it does not do so with the same decisiveness, enormity, and grandeur as the Economy. Technology is the servant of the Economy, as is every other institution and enterprise in contemporary culture. When the Economy fails, it brings disorder, even chaos, to every other institution and enterprise of meaning and value- education, science, the media, government, and technology. On a national scale, technological failures are resolved economically. If a nation possesses adequate economic resources, it quickly and relatively easily resolves technological challenges that may be caused by war or natural calamity. On the other hand, if a nation is not economically powerful, technological challenges are considerably more difficult to resolve. This is witnessed by the way in which the USA quickly and effectively responded to the (technological) destruction of the events of September 11, 2001, and the inability of Serbia to respond to the destruction

wrought by NATO bombing, or Turkey to the August, 1999 earthquake. Economic power can solve problems in all other enterprises that might be claimed to have a sacred significance, but those other enterprises do not exercise a similar power over the Economy. They are its servants and it does use them.

The same is true at the personal level. When my personal engagement with the Economy is interrupted (when I lose my job or am laid off, or if I take a cut in pay because my company is "downsized" or acquired by another), disorder and chaos enter my personal life. This disorder is registered in my inability to participate in the rituals of acquisition and consumption that are religiously necessary to my identity as a citizen of the postmodern world. Only when I am again able to ritually enter into the sacred world, mythically disclosed by narratives of acquisition, can I again be a legitimate member of culture.

The role of the Economy in postmodern culture is every bit the same as the role of nature in primal and archaic cosmological cultures -- if not more. Its order and process are beyond my grasp, or anyone's for that matter, including the CEOs of giant corporations and the Chair of the Federal Reserve. Its ways are at times capricious, ruthless, sudden and uncompromising; it cannot be controlled. Its interest in me is indifferent at best; it colors all of my activities, even if I am not immediately aware of it. It tells me who I am, what I am, and what I am able to do. It defines my dharma. James Carville was right when he said (regarding the need for Bill Clinton's 1992 presidential campaign to focus on what was most important to Americans): "It's the Economy, Stupid."

By the same token, and I think as a consequence, politics is not the religion of postmodern culture. Politics is simply not a cosmological religion for it is too distinct an institution. It exists as a separate entity in society and is not usually a part of everyday life for most persons; in fact, for many, it is something to be avoided. Hardly an institution that promotes integrative experiences, politics is, at best, a divisive social enterprise. Likewise, technology is not sacred in a cosmological sense for it is too transcendental. It is one of the grand abstractions (even an ideal) of contemporary culture and best understood as a critical explanation for the type of societies that have emerged in the postmodern period. Yet it serves more as a term of analysis and classification of the physical/ material world as we know it than it does a sacred reality that one might experientially encounter in a religious sense.

Remember, in cosmological cultures, and in distinction to those in which transcendental systems dominate, religion is not a discrete institution and the sacred is close at hand. In such cultures, such as America's and others at the postmodern stage of development, religion is indistinguishable from culture itself; indistinguishable from the normative way of life and living, which it legitimates as an expression of the sacred order. Ellul's analysis of politics noted earlier may thus be modified to read:

Consumption by the postmodern citizen makes manifest the sacred of the Economy, and the fact that the consuming citizen is endowed with an exciting grandeur. Consumption has become the place of final truth, of absolute seriousness.

It seems fair to say that many (perhaps most) Americans would

grant that they have at times had a sense of this grandeur while engaging in ritual consumption (acquisition-consumption-disposition) and gone about their activities with a seriousness that in earlier times was restricted to religious activity. Still, it is something that most Americans do not think about much. And this is exactly the point. It is just the way things are. What *is* is what *ought* to be. To say otherwise, or to think too hard about it, is not appropriate, not normal, not in harmony with the sacred order and process of the Economy.

This being so, although consumption is ubiquitous, as the specifically *religious* expression of postmodern, cosmological culture, it is nonetheless difficult to find. Moreover, once found, it is hard to distinguish from the rest of culture. Consumption simply is, and through myth and ritual it affirms and acts out (in a heightened and intensified sense) the truth of the cosmic (Economic) order that is already revealed in everyday life. And this truth is that the way things are is the way they ought to be; and the way things are in postmodern culture when things truly *are*, is the way things are when persons consume. Thus, like every other entity in culture, individuals serve the Economy; and when they serve rightly, they prosper. Why? Because of the sacred order and process of the Economy itself. Carville was right and more religious than he could imagine.

In seeking to isolate the religious essence of postmodern culture, our attention should not be directed to discrete, specialized institutions that can be distinguished from other institutions because they are somehow *religious*, but instead to the everyday stories (myths) and activities (rituals) shared by the whole community and communicated and experienced in heightened and intensified ways at specially designated (sacred) times. In these sacred times, we will find what may well be the actual religious phenomena of postmodern culture, and in the finding, discover just how religious it may really be and how hard it may be for its citizens to be different than they are.

Holidays and Holy Days

On the basis of the foregoing, the proposed analysis of holidays as representative postmodern religious events can be briefly sketched. Central to this analysis is the specification of the sacred as the three-fold process of acquisition-consumption-disposition of objects and images; and the specification of religion as the body of myths and rituals that vivify the sacred process for society and individuals.

This being so, and following the socio-economic analysis of Jameson-Baudrillard (and in the context of the religious theories of Ellul-Voegelin), it may be argued that religion in postmodern society is that collection of culturally embedded phenomena that mediate individual and collective relationships with the sacred power of the Economy through acquisition-consumption-disposal. It is not enough to simply acquire and consume objects and images. One must do both and one must also dispose of the objects and images for the sacred to be experienced. The entire process must be completed, for only then (in the cyclical manner that is elemental to cosmological systems) can the process begin again. The quicker the process is completed and then begun again, the greater is one's experience of the sacred, and hence the greater one's power in the socio-religious system. For this reason, popular culture venerates the person who is able to

keep up with the trends in fashion, who is able to acquire a new car every year (perhaps also explaining the recent success of automobile leasing), who buys a *new* house, replaces appliances on a regular basis, installs a new lawn periodically, acquires the most innovative type of computer, and so on.

As is doubtless quite evident, the power of this process has decidedly negative consequences. It leads to waste, the destruction of the natural environment, alienation (in all the old Marxist senses of the word), and dehumanization of others (who themselves may be unfortunate enough for one reason or another to have become commodities). It also helps account for and perhaps best explain the proliferation of addictive "diseases" related to consumption. When thus deployed, the sacred significance of this process reveals such addictions (alcoholism, drug addition, food addiction, sex addiction, shopaholism, and so on) as not only diseases of consumption, as they are often classified, but perhaps most accurately challenges related to the proper relationship with the acquisition-consumption-disposition process. Perhaps, then, they are expressions of a religious addiction.

This being said, and not to get too far into the sacred-profane dichotomy discussion, if we can specify the religious through distinction from the non-religious (or locate the sacred apart from the profane), then we can speak of it more explicitly. Thus, because the sacred is the Economy, and religion is the process of acquisition-consumption-disposal, which engages one with the sacred through myth and ritual, then the non-religious would be that which disengages one from the process. This would be production. Although this seems a rather rudimentary and perhaps inconsequential note, it is necessary to recognize the distinction because, in this context, it allows for the isolation of the religious experience itself. It also represents an inversion of the old Protestant work-ethic, which vested religious merit in economic production, thereby fueling early and middle capitalism.

Today, the cultural logic is reversed. It is no less religious, but the religious basis is different; rather than transcendental and production-validating it is cosmological and consumption-validating. Because production (labor/work) prevents one from acquisition-consumption-disposal, it is the antithesis of the sacred. Production has thus become functionally profane, where in earlier times, it was functionally sacred; and acquisition and consumption, which were once religiously restricted, if not actually profane, have become sacred. When I am working, I am not consuming, yet my working/profane endeavors bring me the substance necessary for me to consume. I thus sacrifice time and energy in the profane realm for the sake of the Economy; not because I find any particular satisfaction in contributing to production (and certainly not because of any religious merit, *per se*) but because I am equipping myself to better perform my religious duty. My sacrifice of time and energy in profane endeavors (labor) rewards me with ritual resources (money), which then allows me to participate in the sacred process of acquisition-consumption-disposal.

This threefold process, as opposed to production (the ideal of early and middle capitalism), defines one's primary religious duty (dharma) in the late-capitalist, postmodern world. As a result, postmoderns sacralize those times and places where they can maximize the experience of acquisition-consumption-disposal, thus motivating them to reduce the realm in which they are engaged in acts of production. From

this motivation is spun off popular ideals (and I would say mythic narratives) embodied in concepts such as the "golden years" of retirement, "extended vacations," "saving up 'comp' or sick time to use all at once," and a whole class of ideals related specifically to weekends: "T.G.I.F.," "living for the weekend," midweek "hump-day," the "three-day weekend," and certainly, for some, the "lost weekend." All of these richly evocative concepts express a resistance to activities of production and an idealization of leisure periods when persons can fully immerse themselves in sacred time and space-times when acquisition-consumption-disposal may be fully experienced and spaces entirely divorced from the profane sphere of work/production. What, after all, do most Americans do in leisure spaces, places, and times? While once it might have been relaxing activities or visits with family and friends, every indication is that today what they do is acquire, consume, and dispose. And although leisure time still may include traditional pursuits, such activities are often prefaced by acquisition rituals. In this regard American holidays manifest a genuine sacredness, becoming true holy days when individuals and entire communities can escape the profane realm and reaffirm the sacred truth of their personal and collective existence.

The annual cycle of American holidays, thus, comes into correspondence with a typical cosmological cycle of ritual celebrations: fixed calendric periods that are recognized as particularly sacred and specifically dedicated to mythico-ritual activity. For postmodern culture, these holidays are holy because they liberate persons from the profane realm of work/production, ushering them into the sacred times and climes of uninhibited acquisition-consumption-disposal, and supplying the religious dynamic of postmodernity. The extent to which work/production ceases (in both time [calendar duration] and space [sectors of the productive economy]) suggests the relative sacredness of a given holiday, but the real defining feature is consumption itself-how much is spent at the temples and shrines of retail commerce during holiday periods. On this basis, I used retail spending as a measure of sacred significance and classified holidays into various categories, the greatest of which I refer to as holy days.

Using this method, the three greatest holy days are Valentine's Day, Easter, and Christmas, with Back-to-School functioning as something of a religious festival. Less significant holy days include Super Bowl Sunday, Presidents' Day, and the Fourth of July. These and other holiday-holy days are explored in more detail in *The Sacred Santa*. For now it can be observed that the underlying force behind the sacred significance of postmodern holy days is found in the relationship of myths and rituals -- what Eliade refers to as mythico-rituals. First it can be noted that rituals allow persons to participate in or otherwise affirm their proper relationship to the sacred. They are intertwined with myths in so far as rituals reenact myths and myths illuminate rituals. Through rituals, believers experience the sacred time of the myth and are brought into communion with the foundational reality of life. In ancient cosmological cultures, myths were widely communicated and fervently reaffirmed, and entire communities participated in intense and prolonged ritual celebrations of mythic reenactment -- drawing all closer to the primordial reality of the meta-myth, which in archaic cultures focused on Nature and its power.

Consistent with archaic religious festivals, the key to

the kinetic intensity of contemporary holy days is their capacity to energize the sacred nexus between myth and ritual. Like those of our archaic ancestors, the holy-day celebrations of postmodern culture vivify the critical sacred linkage of myth and ritual, in this case, drawing all who participate into closer contact with the primordial power of the Economy. This distinctive feature of holy days accounts for a number of other characteristic holy-day elements. It is revealed most strikingly in the proliferation of tertiary myths (advertisements) directly related to a given holiday. Although these are the shortest of all the mythic narratives, they offer powerful and compelling renditions of the meta-myth: success and happiness are gained through a proper relationship with the Economy and revealed in the ever-expanding material prosperity of society and the ever-increasing acquisition and consumption of products by individuals. They also bring persons into closest proximity with the reality of the meta-myth and the threshold of ritual itself.

During holy-day cycles, tertiary myths are widely communicated and fervently reaffirmed; one needs only consider the increased number and size of newspaper inserts on weekends in advance of holidays, TV holiday commercials, and the greater number of ads in the holiday issues of magazines. Additionally, holy-day advertisements (tertiary myths) are acutely focused on the sacred concerns of specific holidays. In these myths persons discover sacred narratives about objects appropriate or simply available for ritual acquisition during specific holy days: lawn and garden tools for Memorial Day, summer foods and beverages for The Fourth, jewelry for Valentine's Day, fall apparel for Labor Day, you-name-it at Christmas, and who-knows-what for America's newest holiday -- Patriot Day, to be celebrated on September 11. [28] To the degree that Patriot Day becomes a genuine postmodern holy day, it will generate its own tertiary myths and Americans will respond with rituals of acquisition, for this is what happens on holy days in American culture.

Christmas is, of course, the most vivid illustration of the postmodern sacralization of holidays and the greatest holy-day cycle of postmodern culture. Christmas is, however, only the most dramatic and dynamic example of neo-cosmological religiosity. It is thus different from other holy days, not so much in essence or substance as in degree and size. When it comes to cosmological religious celebrations, however, size does make a difference, and accordingly, *The Sacred Santa* devotes a full section to an analysis of the Christmas holy day cycle --including a chapter that focuses on the apotheosis of Santa Claus.

During Christmas and other holy-day cycles, pilgrimages to shrines and temples (stores and shopping malls) are more frequent. Persons may review the tertiary myths more closely and become more focused in their performance of sacred rituals of acquisition; fulfilling their dharma as consumers, reaffirming their primordial relationship with the Economy's sacred power. The nexus of myth and ritual glistens in these times; the connection between mythic narratives and ritual performances becoming more immediate, vigorous, deeply felt, and religiously significant. It is also experienced by more of the population during holy-day cycles, drawing all participants closer to the primordial power of the Economy. Taken as a whole, holy-day myths keenly remind citizens of the sacred significance of acquisition and the opportunity they have to do so in a certain sanctified period -- a holy-day cycle. Thus, when one ritually acquires objects depicted in a holy-day

myth, the performance is more purposeful, and the dynamic connection between myth and ritual is clearer, more vivid, more vital, and more sacred for the participant. *The Sacred Santa* is interested in this dynamic connection, why it has risen to religious prominence in postmodern culture, and how it may have replaced traditional transcendental religious practices as the functional expression of contemporary religiosity.

In conclusion, it is my contention that inquiry into the religious dynamic of postmodern culture, using Jameson-Baudrillard together with Ellul-Voegelin, reveals the contours of a cosmological sense of the sacred. Moreover, when attention is directed to the holidays of this culture we may find, as Jack Santino tells us in a wonderful book, they take us *All Around the Year* and really are (adding his subtitle) *Celebrations in American Life*. [29] We may also discover that they are celebrations of American life and its cosmological essence; celebrations that uniquely reveal the religious heart of American culture, and celebrations that are more profoundly sacred than their secular guise suggests. In short, and this is the point of my inquiry in *The Sacred Santa*: When considering contemporary holidays in terms of the method outlined here, they emerge as intensely sacred events; and as such they reveal not only how thoroughly religious postmodern American culture has become but also just how difficult it may be for Americans to cease being the consumers the Economy demands that they be.

NOTES

1. In brief, "cosmological" refers to religions and cultural systems that locate the Ground of Being or Ultimate Power in the natural world. Such systems are contrasted with "transcendental" systems, which locate the Ground of Being in a supernatural dimension -- literally, a realm beyond and radically different from nature. The use of terms "cosmological" and "transcendental" to distinguish these two types of systems was introduced by Eric Voegelin. See Voegelin *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952) and *Israel and Revelation* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1956).
2. See Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).
3. Dell deChant, *The Sacred Santa: The Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Cleveland, The Pilgrim Press, 2002).
4. The specification of three classes of myth is derived, with some modifications, from Jacques Ellul. My meta-myth corresponds to what Ellul refers to as the "basic" or "essential" myth of a culture. My designation of secondary and tertiary myths is derived from Ellul, although, in my deployment, the two are more precisely distinguished from each other. See Jacques Ellul, *New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkins (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), 88-121, esp. 100-110.
5. *Ibid.*, 109.
6. For example, see Eliade's usage of the term in *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1959), 68-70.
7. See Darrell Fasching, *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1993), chap. 4, esp. 134-141.
8. Tillich as explicated by Fasching in *Ibid.*, 137, 139.
9. For example, see Eliade's use of the term in *Cosmos and History*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torch Books, 1959), 68-70.
10. Paul Tillich, "Über die Idee einer Theologie der Kultur," in *Kanstudien* (Berlin: Pan Verlag, Rolf Heise, 1920). Found in translation in *What Is Religion*, trans. James Luther Adams (New York: Harper and Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 165.
11. Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late*

- Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), 35-36.
12. *Ibid.*, 36. See also his earlier work, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 111-125.
 13. *Ibid.*, 5. Subsequent citations in this section are given parenthetically in the text.
 14. Douglas Kellner, *Jean Baudrillard: From Marxism to Postmodernism and Beyond* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1989), 13.
 15. Baudrillard, cited in *Ibid.*
 16. *Ibid.*, 16.
 17. Baudrillard, cited in *Ibid.*
 18. Kellner with citation of Baudrillard, *Ibid.*, 14.
 19. Jameson, *Ibid.*; Baudrillard, in Kellner, *Ibid.*, Daniel Miller, ed., *Unwrapping Christmas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 18-19; and Juliet B. Schor, *The Overspent American* (New York: Basic Books, 1998).
 20. Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1969), 113. Berger cites Voegelin as the source for the term "cosmological."
 21. Ellul, *New Demons*, 50. Subsequent citations in this section are given parenthetically in the text.
 22. *Ibid.*, chap. 6. Ellul notes that he is following Aron and Simondon in his analysis of politics as "secular religion" and this approach may ultimately account for his too-brief depiction of consumption as religion (144-147) and the internal contradiction this depiction sets up with his argument that politics is the functional religion of the contemporary world.
 23. See Eric Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952); *Science Politics and Gnosticism* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1968); and his early work *Die Politischen Religionen (The Political Religions)* (Vienna: Bermann-Fischer, 1938). Curiously, Voegelin interprets "political religions" as variants of ancient Gnosticism.
 24. There are important similarities between Ellul and Voegelin and I think that when used together, as here, they disclose much more than either of them when used independently. Darrell Fasching has done the best job yet of revealing the significant affinities between the work of Voegelin and Ellul and then successfully deploying both their theories, essentially in tandem, to illuminate contemporary ethical dilemmas. See especially, *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima*, chap. 4. In short, Fasching argues that Voegelin's distinction between cosmological and anthropological is the same as Ellul's distinction between sacred and holy, with the latter term in both being essentially analogous to what I have termed "transcendental" and the former term functioning essentially as Voegelin and I (here) have used the term. I think the analogy works well in terms of the sort of ethical analysis Fasching is doing, and could possibly work here to reconfigure Ellul's analysis of political religion. But it would take a reconfiguration of Ellul, and this is hardly necessary when Voegelin's theory works perfectly well as a clarification of Ellul.
 25. Voegelin, 59-60.
 26. Kellner, 16.
 27. My "meta-myth" is analogous to Ellul's "basic" and "essential" myth. See n. 4.
 28. The U.S. Congress passed Patriot Day legislation in the Fall 2001, initially introduced by U.S. Representative, Vito Fossella (R-N.Y.) requesting that the president "issue a proclamation each year calling for state and local governments and people to observe Patriot Day [September 11] with appropriate programs and activities." See Ellen Gedalius, "Patriot Debate," in the *Tampa Tribune*, August 12, 2002, 1, 5. As of now (October, 2002) there does not appear to be any noticeable movement toward sacralization of Patriot Day, although informational observations revealed a considerable increase in retail sales promotions for patriotic paraphernalia (flag decals and bumper stickers, full-size flags, and apparel with various nationalistic symbols and slogans).
 29. Jack Santino, *All Around the Year: Holidays and Celebrations in American Life* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

The Two Faces of Religiosity in Postmodern Society

by Darrell J. Fasching

It is an occasion for great pride and also a sense of humility when one's student becomes one's teacher. Dell deChant was an undergraduate in one of my courses during my first semester of teaching at the University of South Florida in 1982. From the very first week he stood out as an extraordinary student. He went on to prove his promise, finishing his undergraduate and graduate degrees in our program. More recently Dell co-authored *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach* (Blackwells, 2001) with me. And now he is the author of a book on religion and postmodernity -- *The Sacred Santa: The Religious Dimensions of Consumer Culture* (Pilgrim Press, 2002) -- that is quite provocative offers Ellul scholars much food for thought.

What does religion have to do with economics, the sacred with the secular, or postmodernity with premodernity? Unlike most who would see only "difference," Dell de Chant sees important similarities. What do modern scholars like Paul Tillich, Jacques Ellul, Eric Voegelin and Mircea Eliade have to do with postmodernists like Frederic Jameson and Jean Baudrillard? Conversant with postmodern intellectual trends, deChant is no slave to current intellectual fashions but rather places historical eras and intellectual styles (premodern, modern and postmodern) into critical dialogue with each other in order to illuminate the religiosity of contemporary postmodern secular culture.

Deeply indebted to the thinking of Paul Tillich, Eric Voegelin and especially Jacques Ellul in the way he asks questions, but not necessarily in the way he answers them, deChant probes the religious dimension of contemporary secular and postmodern culture. He attempts to understand the religiosity of the economy much the way I attempted to understand the implications of the religiosity of technology for global public policy ethics in *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima* (SUNY, 1993). What we share above all, of course, is a deep debt to Jacques Ellul, especially his work *The New Demons* (Seabury, 1975). For it is Ellul who taught us how to put our age into question.

While Dell's interpretation puts us at odds over Ellul's thesis concerning the priority of technology over the economy, I find in Dell's work an intellectual challenge worthy of the highest respect. Dell deChant asks us to see ourselves and our society with new eyes. He helps us understand ourselves and our postmodern culture.

A dominant theme of modern thought in the 1960s was that religion would disappear to be replaced by the secular society of a scientific age. It is commonplace now to observe that a global religious resurgence since the nineteen-seventies has proved that claim false. What is still often missed is that, quite apart from the resurgence of religions, our everyday

world of commerce and consumerism is saturated with religious myth and ritual. We fail to see this, says deChant, because we tend to identify religion with the transcendental religions like Judaism, Christianity and Islam, where God is understood as different and distant from the natural world. But the religiosity of postmodern society is closer to the cosmological religiosity of premodern primal and early urban societies (as Ellul pointed out in *The New Demons*) where the sacred manifests itself, as it perhaps does in postmodern culture, through a kind of polytheistic diversity rather than uniformity. In this ancient type of society, religion is not a separate realm within society but an aspect of every cultural activity. To participate in the culture is to be religious.

In such ancient societies human beings saw nature as the overwhelming and all-encompassing environment of powers and forces that governed their destiny. Experiencing themselves as totally dependent on these powers, human beings, overwhelmed by a sacral awe, sought to be in harmony with these forces through the myths and rituals of polytheism in all their contradictory diversity. Today the postmodern world mirrors that pre-modern world, deChant argues, except that now the environment that surrounds us and governs our destiny is the postmodern, multinational, global economy. Here deChant uses Ellul to challenge Ellul's central thesis. It is the economy, not technology, he argues, that has transcended and encompassed nature in its marketing strategies. The economy has desacralized nature and turned its abundance into raw materials for commodification while reorienting society's rituals in order to render consumerism a sacred activity serving the new powers that now govern our destiny. Given that the al Qaida chose the World Trade Center in New York City as one of the sacred centers of our society to be destroyed, Dell deChant's thesis has great plausibility. On the other hand, their other target was Washington D.C. -- the political/military center of our society. This too needs to be acknowledged. It appears the al Qaida recognized both as manifestations of what we hold sacred.

Despite Dell deChant's major disagreement with Ellul over the primacy of technique, his argument draws heavily upon Ellul's approach, while substituting the economy for technology. Our problem, says Dell, is that we are blinded to the religious/ritual dimension of our economic life by our identification of religion with transcendental religions, seemingly unaware that cosmological, this-worldly, religiosity has been far more typical and pervasive in the history of the human race. And so, in important ways, we fail to fully appreciate our own actions and the religious rhythms of our own culture, defined by a postmodern cycle of sacred festivals.

In his book, *The Sacred Santa* he analyses the myths and rituals that shape postmodern culture through its eclectic cycle of holidays in far more vivid detail than he has space to do in this issue of *The Ellul Forum*. Through his analysis Dell shows us that the economic rituals of our society bring us into harmony with the powers that govern our destiny, now perceived as the powers of the economy. From the mythic stories conveyed by film, television dramas and mass media advertising, on through the ritual activities of visiting shopping malls as sacred places of intense religious activity, deChant argues for the pervasive economic religiosity of postmodern culture. This postmodern religiosity is an eclectic amalgamation of postmodern myths conveyed by the mass media and the equally eclectic rituals of American postmodern holidays, from New Years day through Super Bowl Sunday, Presidents Day, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, the Fourth of July and on to the "High Holy Days" of Halloween-Thanksgiving-Christmas, peppered with many secondary festivals along the way.

I think Dell deChant has done important work that both builds upon and also goes beyond Ellul in his analysis of postmodern religiosity and the economy. His work is important for Ellul scholars because he introduces Ellul into the postmodern debate which must surely happen if Ellul's work is to remain relevant. And his work pays Ellul the highest form of compliment, for Ellul did not want disciples but rather encouraged us all to think new thoughts in relation to the unfolding challenges of our technological civilization.

Having said all that, I do have some reservations about the way Dell characterizes Ellul's position and how he places his own thesis in relation to Ellul's work. I would challenge: (1) his argument for the primacy of economy over technology as the bearer of the sacred, (2) his argument for consumerism rather than politics as a manifestation of sacral activity, (3) his use Ellul's typological classification of the three levels of myth to make his case and (4) his account of the relation between the sacred and profane. The intent of these challenges is not to undermine the validity of Dell's critique of consumerism but to suggest that it may not put him as much at odds with Ellul's position as he suggests.

The core of Dell's provocative challenge is his argument that it is the economy and not technology that is the new bearer of the sacred in postmodern culture. To do this he uses Jameson's Marxist analysis of postmodern culture. One would scarcely guess from Dell's account of Ellul that Ellul too thought of himself as a Marxist. As such he certainly considered the Marxist thesis of the centrality of the economy but he came to the conclusion that to be a Marxist in our time one had to recognize that it is no longer the economy but technology that determines human behavior. Does this mean that economics is now unimportant? Of course not, the economy is part of the technological system, rewarding the consumer is how the system makes the necessities of efficiency palatable. But for Ellul the obvious fact of cross-cultural study was that whether societies were organized upon socialist or capitalist models, they tended to function very similarly because all modern societies were organized around technical bureaucracies oriented to using the most efficient means. With the virtual collapse of socialist societies that obvious contrast is disappearing. Consequently, while the role of technique remains pervasive it becomes more invisible while the importance of the economy, hyped twenty four hours a day by

CNN and a legion of other media outlets, becomes supremely visible and obvious to all.

For Ellul the issue is the levels at which power operates to shape society and the levels of myth through which a society propagates its way of life. For purposes of sociological analysis, in both cases, one moves from the great abstraction to vivid concreteness. In *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (Seabury, 1973, pp. 280-281) he used the analogy of the ocean to identify levels of power that shape society. At the surface we have waves that can sporadically be stirred up by the wind and become powerful enough to sink a ship. At the deepest level there is only stillness. But in between are the tides and currents that shape fundamental patterns of the ocean and our weather. Applied metaphorically, the surface level is the realm of concrete events that attract our attention especially through media. The deepest level is the abstract level of undifferentiated power. It is in the intermediate level that power becomes differentiated into the underlying patterns that influence the shape of society in a given era. And it is at this level that critical analysis must occur if we are to understand the powers that shape our destiny. In Marx's time, Ellul argued, the currents and tides that shaped societies were those of economics but then the spontaneous convergence of efficient techniques brought about a fundamental transformation that pushed economic activity toward the surface, guided by the deeper currents of technique.

With regard to myth, Ellul divides his analysis of the myths of the technological society into primary, secondary and tertiary myths. As one moves down the scale, from the first to the third, one moves from abstraction to concrete vividness. Dell challenges Ellul's contention that science and history are the basic myths of our civilization and suggests that we look to the myths of the economy – the stories of success and material acquisition promoted through the mass media. Dell thinks science and history are too abstract to function as myth. But I think he misunderstands Ellul here. The primary myths are meant to be conceptual abstractions of the underlying themes of more concrete manifestations. It is not the science of scientists nor the history of historians but the popular imagination of science and history embodied in the secondary myths like the stories of Marxism and capitalism that move people to action and most of all it is the vivid myths or stories of happiness and success (tertiary myths) propagated by the media that energize peoples lives on a day to day basis. The stories and holidays that Dell analyzes belong primarily to the second and third levels of myth but they presuppose science and technique, for the economy is impotent, it cannot fulfill our desires without invention and production. Techniques, like the gods, are both invisible and all pervasive. They only become real through the stories and festivals that structure a society's way of life which occur at the less abstract and more concrete level of economic activity as promoted through the mass media as we move from the intermediate depths to the surface of our society. Without technique there are no products, no glitzy lifestyle to sell and consume.

And this brings us to Dell's third area of critique, namely that Ellul (and Voegelin) are mistaken to identify politics rather than consumerism as the locus of sacred activity in our culture. He points out that politics today is not taken nearly as seriously as consumer activity and he also points out that when Ellul (and Voegelin) talk about politics they both seem to gravitate to the transcendental religions of Judaism,

Christianity and Islam with their messianic/historical orientations rather than to the cosmological pre-biblical religiosity of the ancient world that most closely parallels the religiosity of postmodernism.

Here I would make two points. First, Dell is writing from a perspective of the post-Cold War era that is barely more than a decade old. Ellul wrote in a world divided between two political/economic ideologies that threatened global annihilation. In such a world it is hard not to take politics with ultimate seriousness. But of course that is not our situation today, or is it? We may now be entering a new global cold war defined by an age of terrorism. We may not want to take politics with religious seriousness but apparently others do.

My second point, however, is more fundamental. Dell is certainly right that although Ellul identified consumerism as a form of religious activity he did not give it the attention that he gave to politics, and so it remains an undeveloped area of Ellul's thought. Indeed it is an area that Dell deChant has brilliantly developed. Dell is inclined to put himself into an either/or relation to Ellul's work. The issue is not either technology or the economy but rather to see both as part of a comprehensive technical system. The question is: What is the relationship between them? I am inclined to see Dell's work less in opposition to Ellul's as I am as a complement to it, and a further development of Ellul's critique. Dell can be right about the religious function of the economy without Ellul having to be wrong about technique.

When Dell discusses politics and consumerism in relationship to the sacred, he tends to put it in either/or terms. He suggests the Ellul and Voegelin missed the mark by focusing on politics and transcendental religiosity rather than on consumerism and cosmological religiosity. But certainly in the case of Ellul this is not an either/or choice but a "both-and" choice. For Ellul divides propaganda into two categories, integration propaganda and agitation propaganda. Integration propaganda, says Ellul, is the way a society spontaneously advertises its way of life. Its purpose is to integrate individuals into the social order. It is in this category that Ellul places consumerism and economic activity. But the second category, agitation propaganda, has a different task – that of moving people to action.

I would argue, as Ellul did, that the religiosity of our technological society imitates the cosmological religions in integration propaganda organized around consumerism, happiness and fulfillment. But the religiosity of our technological society imitates the messianic/apocalyptic themes of the transcendental biblical religions when it needs to move its citizens to action – a point well illustrated by current apocalyptic rhetoric not only on the part of Osama bin Laden and the al Qaida but also by the "evil axis" rhetoric of the Bush administration (although the political propaganda of the latter does seem a bit inept). Perhaps an even more relevant example is the current Bush administration campaign to make war against Iraq. A cynic might say that because we are addicted to SUVs (and other oil and gas guzzlers) and the other "necessities" advertised (integration propaganda) by our consumer society and made possible by technique, we are prepared to be moved to act upon the administrations apocalyptic rhetoric (agitation propaganda) and make war to protect our sacred way of life. The integration propaganda sets us up for agitation propaganda. Consumerism and politics are

two complementary faces of the sacred (cosmological and eschatological/apocalyptic) in a technical civilization.

Dell seems to recognize something like the role of agitation propaganda when he says that "politics tends not to generate community-sustaining myths and rituals, but instead, community-destroying narratives and socially disorienting activities . . ." but takes this as counting against it functioning religiously. However, as Max Weber has pointed out, religion not only serves to legitimate the routine order of society but also, at times, to charismatically upset and transform society.

For Ellul, integration propaganda and agitation propaganda work in dialectical tension with each other, as do the sacred and the profane. Indeed, I would argue that Dell reads Ellul's position on the sacred dualistically rather than dialectically as Ellul intends. When Dell says that today it is no longer "production" (technique) that is sacred but consumption, and that production is the "antithesis of the sacred" he seems to think he is putting himself in opposition to Ellul's thesis. But he goes on to say, that the holidays of postmodern cultures "are holy because they liberate us from the profane realm of work production, ushering us into the sacred times and climes of uninhibited acquisition-consumption-disposal, and supplying the religious dynamic of postmodernity." However, this is exactly how the sacred operates in Ellul's account of consumerism and advertising, as brief and undeveloped as it is.

For Ellul the sacred cannot operate apart from the profane. The sacred/profane are not opposites. They form a single dialectical complex in which the profane is the permitted break with the sacred that only more thoroughly integrates us into the sacred order. We become slaves to the necessity of technique because it promises to reward our every desire. The technical society, says Ellul, will not be "a universal concentration camp" rather "our deepest instincts and our most secret passions will be analyzed, published and exploited. We shall be rewarded with everything our hearts ever desired" (*The Technological Society*, Random House, Vintage Books, 1964, p. 427). Consumerism is the way in which necessity is inserted into technique. It puts a smiling face on technological necessity and buys off our freedom with the promise of happiness.

In expressing these reservations about Dell deChant's argument, I hope it is clear that I do not dispute what I consider to be a brilliant and insightful analysis of the religiosity of consumerism. In this regard he has built upon Ellul and gone beyond Ellul in analyzing the nuances of the cosmological religiosity of consumerism. My only dispute has been with his perception that his thesis puts him at odds with Ellul. He certainly is at odds with Ellul in claiming that it is the economy and not technique that is the more fundamental category for understanding our society but when we look at his arguments, many really support and complement Ellul's thesis rather than discredit it. I view Dell deChant's essay and his book, *The Sacred Santa*, upon which it is based as both an important contribution and a vital challenge to those of us who study these issues. And for Ellul scholars, perhaps his most important contribution is to bring Ellul's work into dialogue with postmodernism.
