## JACQUES ELLUL AND UTOPIA

## From the Editor

South Korea has mushroomed into the world's thirteenth largest economy. Its new President Roh Hyun Moon speaks of it as "the hub economy of Northeast Asia." It has more broadband electronic technology per capita than any country on earth. Professor Myung Su Yang positions his work on Ellul within these technological realities.

Scholarly work on Jacques Ellul occurs around the world. But Asian scholarship has not been well represented in *The Ellul Forum* before. Professor Yang's essay is excerpted from chapter 3 of his book-length treatment published in Korean, with the title translated as *Homo Technicus: Technology, Environment and Ethics*. His Ph.D. in Theology was awarded by Strasbourg University and he is a Professor in the Department of Christian Studies at Ewha Womans University in Seoul.

Utopia is an important entrée into Ellul's work, but a concept with subtleties and unending complications. One of *The Ellul Forum's* Editorial Board members and frequent contributors, Gabriel Vahanian, established this territory with his *God and Utopia* in 1977. Both Myung Su Yang and Darrell Fasching have been Vahanian's students and their ability to deal adequately with utopia in Ellul is an obvious benefit. J. Wesley Baker is a veteran student of Ellul's theological work, with a special interest since his doctoral work on "the hope of intervention" in Ellul.

This issue Number 30 completes fifteen years of *The Ellul Forum*. Founding Editor Darrell Fasching carried the editorial load with extraordinary ability for the first ten years. It is emblematic of his leadership and quality scholarship that he contributes to this issue as vigorously as he did to the first.

Katherine Temple of The Catholic Worker Movement passed away on November 22, 2002, and world class scholar Ivan Illich on December 2. They understood Ellul, Temple having written her Ph.D. thesis on him in the early 70s. With him and through him, they contributed enormously to the "critique of technological civilization." Thanks to Carl Mitcham's leadership, issue Number 31 will be a memoriam to their work.

Clifford G. Christians, Editor

# 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*.

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Clifford Christians, Editor, *The Ellul Forum*
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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).

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# Jacques Ellul and Technological Utopoia
## by Myung Su Yang

In "Le projet d'une morale sociale, christianisme sociale" Paul Ricoeur (1966) refers to ideology and technology as the most important issues modern socio-ethics must deal with. It is surely true that the "Death of Ideology" has been discussed for quite some time now, and even in Korea parts of the intelligentsia have joined this movement. However, the concept of ideology still remains the crucial issue in that we have to keep observing its impact. Koreans have confronted a particular ideological situation--the division of the country, yet on the whole have consciously or subconsciously avoided mentioning the term "ideology" in spite of this unique situation. It is essential that we equip ourselves with a broad vision that points to the most fundamental but neglected questions regarding ideology, and at the same time indicate clear answers to solve these questions.

Meanwhile, we have never lived in such a technically developed era in world history---in other words, we live in the age of technology. The environmental ground for our daily lives is no longer Nature but technology. This remarkable phenomenon has brought serious philosophical questions to human beings since the 1950s, when technologies began to develop at an unprecedented rate. Moreover, as modern philosophical ideas have been modified, technology seems to occupy a basic ground for new metaphysical questions. In other words, technology is beginning to be considered metaphysics itself, and in that sense is a substitute for the modern metaphysical question of Descartes' cogito.

In this context, we cannot but raise this crucial but fundamental question: what is technology? In fact, this query arises from worrying about the potential side-effects that technological advance might bring up: 1) a profit-oriented economic system due to the industrialization of advanced technology; 2) the negative impact that the technical development of vehicles has on daily life; 3) the impersonalization and isolation that mechanical ways of thinking provoke; 4) various problems raised in the field of nuclear energy, the environment, and pollution; 5) ethical issues related to the development of genetic engineering; and 6) the growth of our anxiety and apprehension that the extensive power of technology may acquire dominant power over human beings in the near future.

Therefore, current tendencies to analyze technology from psychological, sociological, philosophical, and religious viewpoints are deeply rooted in a critical and anxious gaze toward technology. Thus disparaging technology may represent criticizing the mechanical way of thinking, or mechanical metaphysics. In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler warns that Western civilization is destined to decline because it is founded on linear and mechanical ideas of improvement which are only strategies for survival. Heidegger's postmetaphysics claims that we should escape from the category of technological-scientific metaphysics. The French Marxist Henri Lefebvre also denounces the mechanical paradigm of contemporary culture in the name of the "criticism of the quotidian" (*La vie-quotidienne dans de monde moderne*, 1968).

Today, philosophy seems to pay more attention to language than to existence, probably because of the currently critical point of view toward the civilization of technology. Derrida and most of the postmodernists and poststructuralists have insisted that the autonomous signifier takes precedence over the signified; they also put more value on "ecritime" -- able to be inferred and assuming distance from it -- than on "parole." This may represent their attempt to free themselves free from the unilaterality of mechanical language overwhelming the present. For this reason, the continental philosopher Paul Ricoeur's preference for hermeneutics over analytic philosophy is often spotlighted in America and Britain these days.

Contemporary philosophers are not only struggling to find a solution by investigating language as one of the most fundamental factors comprising human life, but they are also trying to repudiate Technological Language. Heidegger insists that modern technology is incompetent to fulfill the demand and desire of language for "zoon logon echon" (*Holzwege*, 1953, pp. 69-105). His postmetaphysics never believes in the absolute certainty of "cogito," in which the objectified and externalized world can be perceived with human senses. In other words, "cogito" assumes that the technological-scientific world can be portrayed like an object in still-life paintings. If the world exists as a passive and submissive object, then this technological-scientific language does not fit the genuine purpose of language—setting the boundaries of human beings and, at the same time, trying to elucidate our humanity beyond the boundaries, Heidegger claims.

Jacques Ellul thinks of technological language as a language of incantation. It is a language of use, both functional and objectified. Through language, we express what we want to express to express something. In other words, through language we express ourselves to express the world. Under these circumstances, language should be a language of symbols and of existence. Technological language excludes these symbols, and does not raise questions of existence. Technological language signifies the loss of language.

The loss of language means losing the possibility of changing the world. It is language itself that makes the imaginative world, which exists beyond the established boundaries, come true. For this reason, dictators will not set language free. Paul Ricoeur insists that the poetic imagination is the most essential among the three levels of symbols. In fact, metaphoric symbols are likely to be more appropriate for capturing and admitting the variation of language than any other kind of symbols, such as the universal symbols focusing on the imagery, or the dream symbols of Freud. We can feel free only in the surplus world language brings out. Symbols enable us to draw a totally different meaning from the habitual language. Through this symbolic language, we can finally imagine the completely new world. Consequently, if we lose our language in this civilization of technology, it means that we forfeit our ability to imagine other worlds different from the one we are living in. And the loss of our imagination prohibits us from

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seeking other alternatives to technology. At this point, technology is left as the only ideology we can choose. (Here, ideology does not mean a kind of political system or idea but an inclination to maintain and strengthen the present system with false bravado. It is used as an antonym of Utopia.)

Ethics exists where diversity exists. Ethics exists where the possibility of dreaming other worlds is allowed. Ethics comprehends the dreaming of a new world, and pursuing it. New is ethical. Therefore, if there are no possibilities for diversity, no desire to pursue new worlds, no attempt to negate and overcome the present, and no Utopian world that we can find out by going back against the stream of time, then no ethics exists. Without ethics, we will drown in overflowing materials. A society lacking the creative life and the creative person—gained only with creative views—has no ethics. False rumors—false ideologies—might overwhelm it.

I attempt to bring out the negative factors of technology by connecting it with the problems of contemporary theories regarding the philosophy of language. Actually, it is not a simple question to ask, "what is the essence of technology?" Among scholars, there are many different opinions. Some say that technology and humanism cannot exist together harmoniously. Some say that though contemporary technology goes much further than it is supposed to and carries negative results, it might have the potential to come back to its original place and heal itself. And others say that technology should be viewed with a positive and optimistic belief. These positive, negative, or detached attitudes toward modern technology coexist at present.

In my case, I understand technology from a negative point of view. It is not only because most Western philosophers have been on my side, but also because it is really important to know exactly what the negative results of technology can be. Technology has been believed in thoughtlessly in our history. Against this background, I will prove the possibility of utopia, where technology is set free from mechanics and gets closer to human beings. As we know, technology should exist for human beings. Technology should exist for improving human lives. Therefore, seeking its positive effects is as important as knowing its negative side-effects.

Actually, Korea has only a negative impression of technology, regarding it as mechanical and material. It is also true that this negative ideology has been imported from the West. In other words, Koreans have been ignorant of the revolutionary and fundamental spirit of the times when technological development was first initiated. In a way, Korea is following the West's example; it is heading toward a technological civilization. And this situation cannot be denied. To be aware of this situation is the only way to find a solution for it. Besides, as we will see, this technological civilization might a more humanitarian society possible, make us more humane, and make the world a better place to live. Within today's seemingly barbarian civilization, there must be these latent, if mostly unrealized, potentials. Thus, we must not forget that our most urgent task is to make these possibilities known to people. Lastly, I will seek the proper roles and responsibilities theology can take under the present circumstances.

## 1.1 Jacques Ellul: Did Technology Become the Object of Idolatry?

I will begin my discussion on technology with Jacques Ellul. He has a reputation for raising comprehensive questions about the negative qualities of technology. Among his books, *La technique ou l'enjeu du siecle* (1990) and *Le systeme technicien* (1974) are especially well known as keen and discerning analyses of the technological civilization in modern society. He approaches these matters with a religious as well as a social and philosophical point of view. He regards belief in technology as a kind of religious idolatry that manipulates and dominates the modern human consciousness. I cannot completely agree with this point of view, but his attempt to understand the authority of technology with a religious angle looks quite supportable. It might show a possible solution to the struggle for establishing the thesis that the basis of technology is theological.

Ellul provides several possible answers about these problems of technology from various viewpoints. First, he points out that technological development has modified the culture of human society to an enormous degree. It takes us to the society of technology away from the society of nature, to the culture of artificiality from the culture of nature, and thus to an orientation toward technology instead of nature. This transition is such a dramatic and traumatic one that it transforms, not only the content of human culture but also the basic concept of it, into a totally different shape. Before this transition, culture was a term related to nature, but now it reminds us of something artificial, something human-made. Consequently, culture starts to imply artificiality and technology. This change accompanies the modification of humanity itself as well. Now, technology becomes apriori (Marcuse) for human beings, an unconscious superstructure of the human mind (A. Gelen), and the new world of human instincts. At present, discussing human nature or instinct by themselves is a futile effort. Rather, we have to pay attention to technology itself that influences both human nature and instinct.

Second, Ellul asserts that this cultural shift is caused by the de-mystification of technology. From this technological viewpoint, everything is explained mechanically. During this process, the aura of things—which is due to their unexplainableness and reconditeness—is fatally damaged. The transition in religiosity from blind worship to rational reception requires demystification of the idol. And, in a sense, this demystification is essential and indispensable for placing Christianity back in its original place. In Christianity, God is not inscrutable mystery, unreachable master, nor prohibited taboo, but love overflowing into human life through a human being in order to set humans free from the captivity of sin.

In history, the 18th century was a most dynamic and revolutionary period. Technology had developed at an unprecedented rate, and various social and religious taboos had been broken and diminished. Since then, we have experienced the sense of alienation from the traditional hierarchy our ancestors established. Technology has infiltrated today's society, shattering and dissipating the traditional system, replacing it with a newly created order.

Ellul is convinced that this new spirit resulting from technological ideology does not mean the death of religion. Though religion has been desacralized, demystified, and demythologized, human beings still remain "homo religious." He believes that the age of technology is as much religious as the medieval age, but in a different way. Therefore it demands a different form of religiosity from the medieval.

One problem is that he regards technology as the modern sacred. The sacred is, so to speak, a primitive form of religion and from a Christian point of view, a religion of idolatry. It is a process of idolizing an image or an object. However, it is surely an attractive concept to people of all times and places. The sacred itself is, in a sense, a religion that human beings have ceaselessly made up in order to protect their social system and keep living in this world of chaos. Authority, which is essential to the social system to maintain its present state, can be created, admitted and secured by being sanctified. And within this legitimated society—whose authority is secured through the acknowledgement of religion—people seize onto a protective feeling that their food and

life are kept secure. Consequently, even though the sacred seems to have a dimension of the transcendental, sublime, and unworldly, actually it is closely related to the secular aims of religion that justifies people's pursuit of practical benefits. As Eliade says, the sacred has a pragmatic basis (*Traitee d'historie des religions*, 1964). In other words, there is no biblical transcendence, or Bultmann's desacralization. Meanwhile, the religion of the sacred assumes the world is divided into two parts---the sacred world and the secular. This religion is always looking at the sacred world rather than trying to save the secular world. Hence, sanctity is not able to present any dynamic solution for transforming the world into a better state. Strictly speaking, sanctity has so sense of ethics. On the one hand, the sacred makes people move blindly toward the sacred world. On the other hand, it allows and justifies people to pursue their secular benefits. It is a poisonous form of religion, a dangerous opiate.

Jacques Ellul also senses the ambiguity and duality of the sacred. R. Caillois, called a scholar of the sacred, conceptualized the term "duality of the sacred" (*L' home et de sacre*, 1963). According to his thesis, the concepts of "le sacre du respect" and "le sacre de la transgression" constitute the sacred. "Le sacre du respect" exists in a sacred place, while, "le sacre de la trangression" creates the concept of sacred time. It is a ritual time for worship. At the festival of the sacred, the sanctified world is profaned and secularized in this ritual, though the time is limited. It is a departure from the realm of the sacred. However, "le sacre du transgression" is allowed within a limited time span. By being allowed to participate in this ritual of sacred transgression, people have time to feel free from the strict spirit of the sacred. For that reason, the aim of this festival is to preserve the authority of the sacred. Though it is likely to possess an emancipating mechanism allowing one to breakaway from its strictness, sanctity is actually totalitarian and ideological. It is far from biblical religiosity. Ellul asserts that the sacred cannot find even a small place in biblical revelation.

Hence, Ellul's idea of regarding technology as the modern sacred is different from Christianity. Technology has a tendency to desacralize the sacred, but at the same time it sacralizes itself and tries to occupy the domain of the sacred. The sacred itself never disappears. The object of the sacred is transferred from one to another---in other words, from nature and culture to technology. At present, human beings are sanctifying history through the backing of technology, though sanctifying history as well as nature is strictly prohibited in Christianity. In the modern world, our daily experience is deeply grounded in technology, no longer in nature. As an enchanting magic carrying out the human dream, technology is now worshipped and adored. Therefore, as science plays the trigger role for remythologization, technology leads to resacralization, placing itself in the most sacred and religious position. Modern society then logically remains sacred—not profane and desecrated. Only the object of symbolization is transferred from nature to technology. Consequently, Ellul posits that the recent phenomenon of the resurrection of religion in this secularized modern society is closely connected to the idolatrous and mechanical religion caused by the sanctification of technology.

Thus, the question arises: why does Ellul insist that technology is the object of modern sacralism, and an idolatrous religion? There are several possible answers. To study them, we will look into a scholarly critical viewpoint toward technology.

## 1.2. Technology Is the Will to Power

Like Oswald Spengler, Ellul regards technology as a will to power. The religiosity of sanctity fulfills the will to power. This will to power has a close connection to the matter of justification.

In fact, Ellul states, technology becomes a combination of the will to power and self-justification (*L'esperance oubilee*, 1972, p. 81). Incantation, the most primitive form of technology, is a good example. Incantation objectifies nature and takes advantage of it with human power. And at the same time, it appropriates the name of God to justify itself with a spell. Thus, the first technology is the outcome of the combination of the will to power and self-justification. According to critics, technology is based on the process of objectification, and this objectification is based on the process of cognition, which itself pursues a dominant power in the end. Objectification accompanies representation. (Here, representation means Vorstellung---in other words, the act of putting together everything shattered and fragmented.) In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant provides a detailed explanation of this concept.

For Jacques Ellul, modern technology is not so different from incantation. The desacralization of modern technology results from our attempt to acquire the right of self-justification with our own hands. Now, technology becomes the agency of justifying activity, and the supreme value in modern society. Ellul says, "the development of technology is basically the expression of the will to power of human beings. The realization of the will to power is the purpose of technology and the attainment of materials is no more than a by-product of it" (*Le systeme technicien*). People express themselves through technology because technology is the best tool for pursuing power, satisfying our instinct for power. Therefore, the religiosity of technology is actually a religiosity for justifying our activities and ourselves (casuistry). This is the essence of technology, as Ellul defines it.

Hence, the language of technology is the language of incantation as it was in the primitive age. The language of technology possesses people with a fantasy that they have omnipotent power over everything in the world. In this fantasy, people feel that every conflict and contradiction becomes reconciled and coexistent harmoniously. This is why, as Marcuse insists, technology functions as a kind of ideology in this highly developed society.

Under the name of technology, which controls the target through the process of objectifying it, everything is estimated by its usefulness or functional faculties. The thing itself and its usefulness is so mixed up that it is almost impossible to distinguish one from the other. Persons are also appreciated for functionality. Whether they have the ability to achieve what is demanded of them, determines each person's worth. Finally, objectification gradually expands its territory from nature to human beings so as to dominate them. Technology objectifies the human species and dominates it. Dragged out of the subject's seat, human beings become passive and impersonal objects in this enormously developed mechanical society. Now, technology is the subject. Communication is performed without "parole." Humanity as a subject of communication is erased, and only an anonymous somebody as a tool for communication is left. Ellul says that the reason for the overflowing of language is to compensate for the loss of real language. The loss of real language is a loss of humanity. Because the idolatrous religiosity of sanctity victimizes and objectifies human beings, technology, according to Ellul, alientates them and opens the window for communication only to mechanical and artificial things.

## 1.3 Whether Technology Is Autonomous or Not Matters

The self-justification of the will to power, as described above, assumes autonomy. If technology becomes autonomous, it becomes the supreme authority. And whether technology is autonomous or not really matters in approaching the problem of

technology. If technology is autonomous, then it exists beyond our control.

If technology is autonomous, from what is it autonomous? The answer is from human beings. Therefore autonomous technology alienates human beings. Modern technology, set free from human beings, goes its own way. Originally, technology was a tool for achieving some purpose, but now it becomes a purpose unto itself. No one asks what technology can do for human beings' benefits any more because this question is now meaningless. Technology operates independently in terms of its own effectiveness. As Jurgen Habermas regards technology as a system of praxis with a practical purpose, so Ellul does not deny that technology has been instrumental. The point is that the instrument has acquired autonomous independence. The boundary between the subject and object has become blurred and only instruments remain. The epistemology that insists that the object can exist only through the subject's cognition process, or the ontological claim that beyond the subject there exists an agency which restricts the subject—these questions are voided in modern society. The instrument is the only reality. The subject is dominated by the instrument, and the object is the outcome of the instrument. Therefore, it is not correct to regard the society of technology as a kingdom of the object.

Technology objectifying itself as an instrument is characterized by exclusiveness and inclusiveness. Exclusive technology refuses to get mixed with other things, and rather likes to reign over them. The characteristic of technology is to reign wherever it goes. To the modern human, whether to appropriate technology or not is equivalent to whether to live or die. We have no choice. We are living in the age of inescapable technology. Technology is infiltrating into every domain of our society including culture, religion, politics, and even sex. The structure and the pattern of human activities have become mechanized. Truth disappears and only technical skills are left. Without technology, no race can survive in this modern world. Within a mechanized society, distinctive racial qualities become indistinctive. Social, economic, psychological, family, and industrial systems become technologically patterned. The varieties of each culture vanish as the mechanical and technical world comes into its own.

Within the domination of technology, the humane aspects are completely excluded, and human beings themselves are finally alienated from their own activities. Only producing the mathematically perfect outcome really matters. Machines replace human beings, and labor loses its voice. Thinking and working become separated from each other, and the voluntariness of labor vanishes. Technological rationality conquers every field in this world; everything is dependent on technology. Technocrats even lead modern politics. People seem to have the power for the final decision, but in reality the human mind is already set up and manipulated by technology.

In this technological society, adaptation must be one of the highest virtues. Virtuous people are required to agree to technical development, adjust to a reality grounded in technology, and accept the fact that technology produces without thinking about it. Under the technological circumstances in which "ideologie du fait" controls our daily lives, virtue loses its connection to creativity, and instead becomes related to survival. People do not have the freedom of choice any longer, and are reduced to a mechanical instrument seeking after effectiveness.

The exclusiveness and inclusiveness of autonomous technology eliminate all humane dimensions and secure the power of technology over every domain of human society. In Habermas' term, technology—in other words, instrumental action, one-sided monologue, alienated productive action—gulps down all of the channels of communicative interaction, and the praxis of humanity. Instrumental action becomes the paradigm that produces all categories. Everything is absorbed into a productive movement. Consequently, the Marxian theory of explaining social ideology through a connection between productivity and production relation should be modified. Marx thinks that the latter is subordinated to the former. But in Harbermas, these two terms are replaced by praxis and techne, and thus praxis is subordinated to techne.

According to critics, the fact that techne overwhelms praxis means that technology attains autonomy, and people start to be alienated from their own society—as Habermas predicts this phenomenon. In a traditional sense, technology is something associated with "poiesis," or production. Here, production means pro-dure, or pro-duct, in other words, "Her-vor-bringen." It is used not only with an instrumental connotation but also with an epistemological implication in that production here covers the process of seeking after truth. However, in modern society, technology is not a simple productive action, nor is it the action of elucidating something. It contains its own systematic pattern. Modern technology is independent of something it is supposed to elucidate, then establishes its own rules and systems in itself, and finally justifies them.

Accordingly, as Marcuse asserts, "it is technically impossible that human beings can decide their life voluntarily." If so, the consideration of human responsibility becomes completely unnecessary. In this context, technology seems to bear the anti-ethical. The society of technology is neutral. Therefore we are now living in an anti-ethical society instead of un-ethical one. We cannot recognize the possibilities of the un-ethics that anti-ethics will bring out in our society in the near future. Emmanuel Levinas says it is an inevitable outcome that people start to lose the feeling of responsibility within this modern society.

### 1.4 Technology Becomes the Only Ideology

Sanctity presumes a social connotation, that is, ideology. Ideology works through integration, totalization, and self-justification. Especially, sanctity shows an incredible ability for self-justification. Some scholars believe that we have to move forward to a post-modern society because there is no alternative for handling the issue of justification in today's society. But for Ellul, technology is the very alternative that can offer the answer for this problem. The self-justifying ability of technology operates classlessly, so even the proletariat regards technology as an agency of emancipation. Moreover, according to Henry Lefebvre, the technology of self-justification is so deeply rooted in the modern consciousness that we can not feel it as ideology. The ideology of technology is now clad in the armor of science.

Meanwhile, technology performs the integrative function perfectly in organizing a huge societal system. Things anti-technological are regarded as anarchic, and they are not permitted to enter the current society. Only things totalized and centralized are permitted. By computer, everything is thoroughly systematized, and democratization and decentralization become eventually impossible. No negative response can be given to this technological organization where only indiscriminate futileness remains. Technology destroys creativity and oversimplifies the rhythm of life.

Henri Bergson says that life is a continuation of new happenings. However, if technology tends to oversimplify the dynamic power of society and bring it to a standstill, then we cannot have a real life with technology. Everything becomes standardized and normalized. Normality is a virtue. Unexpected departure from conventional, normal, natural things is considered anti-technological. Hence, in the realm of technology, there is no

transcendence. Though it seems to progress at an unprecedented rate without recognizing its speed limit, there is absolutely no possibility of transcendence. Heinrich Ott calls it "the transcendence of the black." Technology cannot be adventurous. Rather, it is insular and parochial in that at best it can produce other kinds of technology. In human activities, purpose transcends the accumulated tools, while in the case of technology, by contrast, tools dominate purpose.

To sum up, Ellul regards technology as an idolatrous religiosity---in other words, as a sanctity---that controls the consciousness of the human mind in modern society. But another question follows: Is this enough to explain technology? In the next section, we will examine the nature of technology from a utopian viewpoint. Utopia is exactly opposite of sanctity and provides the possibility of emancipation.

## 2.1 Technology and Utopia

Sometimes it seems that technology is likely to rule all over the world as sacred religion. If so, the secularity of technology would drive out the transcendency of God. Human beings have an inclination to idolize everything, to worship it. Perhaps, things that have an ability to set people free from captivity are reduced to the captivity itself through our foolish mistakes. If technology is reduced to technologism, then, the same thing would happen. If we forget to pray God for his grace, and try to solve all problems technically, then genuine religion could not possibly exist in this society.

However, technology is not always reduced to technologism. Moreover, technologism is, in a sense, a contradictory concept of technology. Generally, it presumes that its instrumental quality is the only attribute technology has. But in fact technology is a method or a manner of living, not simply a tool. In other words, technology is associated with metaphysical questions rather than economic ones. It is a "manner of life," which betrays the truth and possible ways of life, is surely associated with transcendental qualities. Life is internally transcendental, and when this transcendence is represented to the exterior world, it becomes genuinely transcendental. It cannot exist beyond the tangibility and productivity of life. Embodying and producing the transcendence of life, this is art.

Let us call it utopia. Sanctity has religiosity; so does life. It is true that utopia reminds us of a dream world, but in Western thought utopia has been considered the adventurous spirit that pursues new and unknown truth. In *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, Ernst Bloch says the most essential quality of utopia is "novum." Psychologists explain that the utopian spirit lies in the unconsciousness of the human mind latently, and is strongly influenced by accumulated experiences. But their explanation cannot be correct because the utopian spirit is not past-oriented but future-oriented. In other words, it is a kind of pro-consciousness, facing the future.

Utopia differs from metaphysics in that the latter explains things that already exist, while the former recreates the present in order to advance toward a new future. Therefore, "novum"—the utopian spirit—is bound to be critical of the present. It seeks after the possibilities of difference from the present situation. In *Ideologie et utopie*, Karl Mannheim also notes the critical qualities that the utopian spirit implies. Both ideology and utopia, as the outcomes of the social imagination, keep some distance from the present society. But, the ideological imagination is engaged in maintaining and justifying the present social system, while the utopian imagination works toward negating and deconstructing the present, and finally establishing the new system. .

The fact that utopia faces toward the new, unknown truth does not mean that the essence of the utopian spirit is daydreaming

or preposterous. G. Kapouge, who has studied the history of utopia. says: "Utopians did not dream with their own ideas. They vehemently wished that their idea would be satisfied." Mannheim thinks of "Civitas Dei" as the essence of the utopian spirit. During the Protestant Reformation, the Reformationists longed to establish "civitas dei" in the world. They did not wait for the kingdom's coming, but did believe in its coming. Waiting is passive. It assumes the postponement of the kingdom's incarnation. But believing in it is more active. Belief makes the incarnation realized in the world. By strong belief, the future comes true at present. Bloch's and Moltmann's "hope" is closely associated with this belief. In a sense, belief is hope and vice versa. Utopian spirit, a hope toward the realization of the new world, is dynamic. In this spirit, the new world will come true by earnest belief in its incarnation.

In other words, the utopian spirit consists of a beginning and an ending. It is a desire to live in a new world with a new system and new values. Therefore, the transcendence of utopia is different from the transcendence of sanctity. Sanctity attempts to maintain its sacredness by separating the sacred and the secular from each other, while utopia joins the world with "incarnated transcendence," never dividing the sacred and the secular. The transcendence of the utopian spirit seeks after a different system in order to build a new kingdom, excluding the ideological qualities of sacred transcendence. Because of the worldliness and tangibility of utopia, Bloch calls it "transcending without transcendence." The transcendence of sanctity works for each of the selfish desires living upon totalitarian authority, while utopian transcending tends to sacrifice the self for new possibilities. In Gabriel Vahanian's terms, the former is soteriological and the latter is eschatological. Utopian transcendence is a spirit of 'homo viator,' the biblical man, who is willing to refuse a stagnated immobility. At the same time it goes beyond ordinariness, seeking to minimize existence at the bottom and maximize ethics at the top.

I now present how technology implies the utopian spirit and takes advantage of it. First, I will propose technology's newness.

## 2.2 Technology, the Possibility to Be Different

With technology, homo sapiens become human beings. That means that we have opportunities to be different. Exiting from repetitions and normal cycles is the event of life. Life is newness. Life is the repetition of newness. Thus, it is mystery. Human beings can be human beings when they become a new person. Technology is crucial in this process. In other words, technology makes human beings as a new species.

Intelligence and culture are two main traits of humankind. Intelligence is a door escaping from the instinctive cycle of nature, and culture is the product of intelligence. Intelligence and culture also relate to technology. Philosopher Henri Bergson pointed out that intelligence is artificiality. For him, artificiality, in particular, means the ability to make tools as tools.

The possibility to be different is culture. The second environment born through technology, the new artificial milieu--that is culture. Technology is also art. By creating culture, mankind can make the environment without being controlled by it. Humankind can change the first nature into the second nature. When humanity did not hold anything in its hand, nature overwhelmed mankind as a nature-god holding supernatural power. Under these circumstances, mankind and nature stand in opposition, and this confrontation yields chaos. However, when mankind hold tools in their hands, they can change nature for the sake of mankind and they live together. The transcendence of "homo technicus" is a new person and a new world. As long as it

pursues newness, it is not eternal but eschatological. When we believe that anything surrounding humanity becomes its counterpart through technology, language is the first technology because people look at the world from a humanities viewpoint.

Human beings deny being a part of nature through technology. Human beings are not a part of nature, but a part of a new man. A real person is a new person. Unlike Ellul's critique, it is not easy to say that the humanization of nature brings the isolation of mankind because it brings denaturalization. The humanization of technology takes a decisive action to escape from an instinctive cycle. Through the de-mystification of nature, technology makes a person to be manlike and nature to be nature. Thus it helps to have a good relationship between mankind and nature.

By creating nature as the de-mystified one, technology shapes nature to mankind, thus making a stage for a new world. De-mystification, humanization, and newness exist together. It is the transition from the transcendence of sanctity to the transcendence of utopia. That is also the tradition of the Bible. In the Bible, God made nature. Nature exists in relationship under God. It also means that nature exists in relationship under human beings.

In fact, the responsibility of human beings for nature exists after nature is de-mystified. Technology asks endless adventures and responsibilities of human beings when it asks mankind to go beyond the natural world. For example, artificial insemination should be understood in this context. It is not right to oppose medical insemination because it disrupts existing ethics and thereby ruins mankind. That kind of attitude cannot solve a fundamental problem. In contrast, the problem of medical insemination elicits our sense of ethics and responsibility. It asks us to demonstrate ethics rather than only discuss it.

In the case of medical insemination, the parents are not real parents of children biologically. In particular, the father is not a real father because the mother uses the spermatozoa of someone else. However, when we see that parents accept the children as their real sons and daughters, we recognize that mankind can construct life with love regardless of the biological family concept. Non-biological parenting awakens a new sense of ethics for mankind. Opening our eyes to a new ethics of love shows the possibility that we can make the world new. Medical insemination asks high-level responsibility based on one-way love instead of the responsibility based on mutual love. It shows the possibility that a person who goes with technology becomes a new human. The technological spirit asks mankind to open its eyes. As Jang Brun pointed out, technology is a human effort to escape. In other words, technology should be understood as a metaphysical philosophy that conquers the current situation of human beings.

In fact, technology itself is the continuation of newness. Several scholars studying the process of the technological development have made clear that it consists of discontinuities. Thomas Kuhn pointed out that the development of science begins with a revolution, consisting of a new paradigm that is totally different from normal science. Technology makes something incessantly, but exists over its creation. From this perspective, language is the first technology. Language designates some events through its symbols. Language, as the first technology, exposes something actualized, but consistently overcomes it. Thus this characteristic should be considered as its substance.

According to this account, Ellul's assertion that technology will eliminate a meaningful mankind because of its autonomy is too serious. Everything belongs to the hand of human beings. Cybernetics shows this trend well, clearly demonstrating the difference between mankind and technology. The difference is the space that mankind is involved with incessantly. People worry that cybernetics, cutting-edge technology, would rein in human beings by invading their original space. However, according to scientists who examine cybernetics, cybernetics makes clear the difference between mankind and technology.

The cognition of mankind is always overall knowledge, while the program of cybernetics consists only of simple cognition. Even recently developed expert systems are helpless in the face of abruptly occurring events because they act according to pre-made programs. As long as the essence of cybernetics is reappearance, what reappears is important.

Human beings decide what is important. The final decision always depends on mankind. The development of technology therefore does not threaten mankind. It asks more responsibility of us. The self-control of technology is not acceptable. When we accept the self-control of technology, our responsibility will be lost. Schumacher preferred a middle range technology to super-technology and pointed out as follows: "I believe the new direction for developing technology is that it gratifies the needs of mankind" (Small is Beautiful).

Technology is the technology of mankind. Automation is based on patterns following the strategies that mankind pre-made. The most important thing to emphasize at this point is the way in which mankind selects. The process of decision is an ethical decision involving values. The development of technology does not create anti-ethics, but asks for a high level of ethics. In sum, technology makes us know who we are as cybernetics only hints at. And it makes us realize that we are going for a new world ourselves. Technology cannot copy mankind. Humans as beings of language exceed technology and cybernetics.

Pierre Levine, the French cybernetics scholar, points out that human beings are able to know what they do not know. They can go to the unlimited world of imagination. Humankind is not just what we currently are; it is more that that. Technology actually incites this kind of understanding of mankind. With technology, mankind looks upon a man as a real man. The hope of humans is humanity. In Ellul's criticism, humans only know the means of technology without knowing its ends. That is a very good opinion. However, technology is not teleological, but eschatological in the sense that technology is waiting for the appearance of newness. Through breaking down the absoluteness of existing authorities, technology liberates people from social constraints and helps them to deny naturally a given society.

As G. Hottois explains, the world of technological science surrounded by a new environment is totally different from the phenomenological-analytical world or metaphysical philosophy (Le signe et la technique, 1984, p. 81). The phenomenological-analytical world tries to evaluate tradition and history in many ways. Metaphysical philosophy focuses on explaining a given world while thinking of nature. The technological society that thinks of transforming things focuses most intensely on the imagination of the future. Hottois expresses well the characteristics of the utopia of technology. For him, the development of technology fulfills through rapid change what we have never expected.

Whether we take advantage of technology, or produce oppression or alienation due to the characteristics of dehumanized technology, depends on our attitude. Technology itself is not the problem. For instance, we have many leisure hours because of the development of technology. Since we have spare time, we can think unusual things that differ from our daily life. Technology is very close to the transcendence of utopia that repeatedly asks new things.

## 2. 3. Technology, Realization of Eschatology

Our thought and imagination need technology for their realization. To be concrete something needs technology. Utopia is also realized with technology. Here, we want to examine another dimension of utopia—its eschatological aspect. And eschatology means what Bultmann says. For him, eschatology is to decide something while considering the present as the end. The end is energy to pull the future to the present and embody it. Our belief makes it so.

Imagination must be realized if it is to change the world. Materialization needs technology for effective realization. The materialization of unlimited newness that preempts the future is technology. The possibility of newness that technology predicts always considers reality. That is the directness of technology. Thanks to technology, newness is always considered as a concrete realization in the world. It is similar to language. The symbolism of language has its meaning under the condition of directness. The imaginary world that technology provides is a preliminary process that fulfills newness in the world. Materialization in the world is the characteristic of the end of technology. Technology always considers realization in a concrete situation, unlike science. Technology is more instinct than science in terms of its power to make human beings humanlike, because technology provides embodiment. With technology mankind gives up the idea of leaving this world and participates in the world.

Hottois has told us that modern philosophy considers language as its subject because it is the opposite of the directness of technological eschatology. Since technological language always directs in a clear way, modern society loses the wealth that the symbols of language bring. Therefore, the main subject of modern language philosophy—without analytical philosophy—is to emphasize that language is not something that controls directly. This trend is clearer in the language philosophy of Derrida's post-structuralism than that of Paul Ricoeur's phenomenology. For Derrida, the secondary characteristic of language is that the true meaning of language becomes blurred because original language is divided into several sub-categories. It is the autonomous signifier in contrast to the significant.

When Derrida talks about the autonomous signifier, some aspects are similar to the opposition of technological language. Marcuse also mentioned the desolateness of technological language spreading throughout today's industrial society. He thought that technical language always tries to fabricate something, so indicates something directly. For him, therefore, language is buried in the immediately correct.

This kind of criticism of technological language exaggerates, although it is true in some sense. Derrida's idea is an overstatement seeking to change modern society in a different direction. In fact, it is useless if language does not indicate the realities of life out of texts. As he pointed out, to be "de-construction," language should be a thing that indicates something, that is, constructs as well as demolishes. The correctness of technological language should be understood as a directness that realizes certain purposes. It should not be understood as a tool to make our life dreary. The eschatological characteristic of technological language is to make something. Technology does not know the difference between theory and practice because of the character of technological language. However, since technology does not know the planner and the practitioner, it offers a new epistemology and gives unlimited imagination to the world of knowledge.

Because of its eschatological character, a technological view of the world differs from teleology. In the teleological view, the present cannot be new because it has already been designated by the given purpose of the future. That is what physicists and biologists want to explain. F. Jacob in France speaks of the process of the development of life, rather than the taking apart and assembling of engineering. Jacob borrows Levi-Strauss' vocabularies. Here, engineering is work with a specific purpose. Taking apart and assembling something indicates directness flowing from fortuity. J. Monod also argues that the development of life was not followed by any sequence made by nature. He says that the development of life fulfills itself through unanticipated new things. A view of the world in the field of physics is neither determinism nor probability. In sum, the world that technology wants to seek is the world that leaves our destiny in our hands. The knowledge of technology is not far from ethics. Instead, it raises ethical questions by insisting on clear responsibility. It does not demolish ethics although it creates new movements in the methodology of ethics.

Thus far, we have studied the spirit of utopia in terms of a technical view of the world that has newness and eschatology as the central concepts. The main interest of technology is not to know, but to change. It does not mean that technology changes the world without knowing the current situation. It means that technology focuses on changing the world while withholding a core knowledge of the realities of life.

## 2. 4. Conclusion

How do we manage these technological phenomena? It is possible when we resuscitate the spirit of utopia in Christianity. Let's answer with several propositions.

### a. The Technical Phenomenon Requires Changes in Religion

The advent of the technological world does not ask for the obliteration of religion, but for new characteristics of religion. As J. Fourastie has pointed out, if religion is a view of the world, the advent of a new view of the world requires a new religious view of the world (*L'eglise a-t-elle trahi? 1974*). It asks for a new view of God and a new view of the church. Revelation is always related to some time and someone. Therefore, revelation is always open. As G. Friedman argues, the crisis of mankind in technological culture is not temporary, so we need a new religious view of the world. Friedman insists that we have to expect that a new spiritual life will come into full bloom in the new technological environment (*La puissance et la sagesse, 1970*).

In any case, it is important to consider technology as a problem of religion. We cannot replace the achievement of technology with the supernatural aspects of religion. It is necessary to awaken sleeping religion by accepting the new view of the world that technology institutes.

### b. Accept the World Fundamentally

Theology should have an optimistic attitude to the world. The world is not just a place humanity enters. The world is the world of people for people. God should be the final principle for explaining the world and its people. There should be some fundamental acceptances of the world and people. Although the world is evil, although my life and the lives of others are ugly, this kind of belief accompanies the ethical power that conquers the world. Theology persuades the public to avoid pessimistic fatalism. This pessimistic fatalism spreading through churches relates to the struggle for existence that seeks egoistic selfishness instead of interlocking human responsibility with the sacredness of God. The world is the place of God's love, and the place where the creative responsibility of people is fulfilled. In fact, waiting for a new world without doing anything with this one is equal to giving up on God.

Here, we deny any attempt to divide the area of religion and technology. This kind of attempt is the perspective of several

scholars who want to take technology seriously. Their way of thinking is that technology gives learning and religion gives knowledge. In this methodology, technology makes and religion acts. The former gives material abundance and the latter gives the meaning of life. However, if we think that technology consists of modern culture, and the spiritual world of religion is different, it is possible to uphold a fundamentally optimistic attitude toward the world.

The cultural philosophy of J. Maritain does not give us any progressive solution. For him, technology itself is good, though it is important how mankind uses it. He thinks that technology brings material abundance. In other words, for him, technology makes it possible for mankind to escape material poverty, but it is not related to anything spiritual. His logic is that technology is about secular things, so it handles materials, while the arena of spirit belongs to religion. In his philosophy, he divides technology and religion. " The church is holy and the world is secular." There is no fundamental affirmation of the world. There is no effort to see the world as the condition of God.

That perspective loses the power of ethics because the transcendence or newness of the core concept of ethics comes when we affirm the world. That is also a message that the culture and ethics of Schweitzer gives. As he clearly pointed out, eventual optimism is ethics. Affirming the world and life fundamentally and eventually gives birth to the power of ethics that changes current disciplines. "Ethics is no more than fulfilling the idea of affirming the world and life." Unlike the natural philosophy of Hegel, Schweitzer believed that only an optimism affirming the fact that life is originally beautiful makes the current era new.

## c. The Total Otherness of God

The greatness of God is not in the order of the world, but God participates in the world. Technology left alone seeks a boon, one that falls into historical incoherence because it seeks a total newness. It denies that the de-mystification of nature becomes the link to the sacredness of the history. As Oscar Culmann puts it, "The New Testament does not teach religion over the world. However, it needs to have an eye for denying the current order of the world" (*Dieu et Cesar*, 1956).

The total otherness of God is the source of revolutionary iconoclasm. Thanks to the otherness of God, the people go to a new world with the hope of a new people. Theology should insist on the otherness of God to prevent technology from falling into technological determinism. That is also the spirit which technology embraces.

*From Ch. 3 of Homo Technicus: Technology, Environment, and Ethics by Myung Su Yang (Seoul: Korea Theological Institute, 1995). Translated by Dal Yong Jin.*

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# Ellul and Technological Utopianism
## A Response to Myung Su Yang
## by Darrell J. Fasching

**Myung Su Yang's Challenge to Ellul**

Myung Su Yang is a kindred spirit, whose paper I read with great interest, for it is clear from reading his essay that we both deeply appreciate two great theological critics of technology, Jacques Ellul and Gabriel Vahanian – the first as an iconoclastic critic of technological utopianism and the second as an iconoclastic advocate of it. Yang's essay is complex and at times even a little confusing, and yet very illuminating. In the first two sections of this response I shall simply try to restate the core arguments as I understand them. In the third and final section, I will try to asses the strengths and weaknesses of his argument. . .

"Korea," says Myung Su Yang, "is heading toward a technological civilization. . . . To be aware of this situation is the only way to find a solution for it." Ellul, we are told, helps us to understand the perils of technological civilization – the autonomy of technology and the dehumanization it brings in its wake. And yet Yang immediately follows this observation with an expression of optimism; namely, that technological civilization also offers new possibilities to create a more humanitarian society. To make people aware of this other possibility , says Yang, is "our most urgent task."

Myung Su Yang makes it very clear that while he appreciates Ellul's pessimistic critique of technological civilization and finds much of it valid, nevertheless he fears that Ellul's analysis tells only half the story. For technology, he argues, deconstructs one understanding of our humanity only to make way for another, more biblical understanding. Yang seems to play Ellul off against thinkers such as Ernst Bloch and Gabriel Vahanian, arguing with the latter that technology has deconstructed an understanding of our humanity based on nature only to open up the possibility of a more biblical or eschatological view. Yang lays out his understanding of Ellul's thesis and then critiques it, in order to offer his more optimistic theological view.

**Yang's Account of Ellul's Thesis**

Myung Su Yang is appreciative of Ellul's work for showing that the central problem of a technological civilization, dehumanization, is located in religiosity. This religiosity gives technology its autonomy by "sanctifying" it so that technology comes to be treated with the reverence reserved for the sacred. Human beings come to worship the work of their own hands as if it is something wholly other, and so end up in alienation.

Yang interprets Ellul as following R. Caillois' thesis of the duality of sanctity in which "the religion of sanctification assumes the world is divided into two parts – the sacred world and the secular" in such a way that "the sacred of transgression" is a ritually permitted time of chaos that profanes and secularizes the world so that "people can have a time to feel free from the strict spirit of the sanctity." Such a permitted time of revolt then passes only to more securely reaffirms "the sacred of respect" that legitimates the autonomy of technology and renders choice an illusion. As a result everyone ends up living in a society where people seem to have a choice and yet the autonomy of technology renders these choices irrelevant. It is a world in which technology orchestrates everything and nothing new and unexpected can happen.

Such a society, says Yang, is not so much unethical as it is 'anti ethical." What role could ethics possible play in a civilization in which choice is an illusion? And so this technological religiosity becomes the opiate of the people. Finally, as a result of this dialectic of respect and transgression, technology has desacralized the world as sacred order of nature only to resacralize the world as a sacred technological order whose "will to power" is justified not by the "natural superiority" of some over others as by technology and its efficiency.

**Yang's Utopian Critique of Ellul**

Having laid out Ellul's analysis and critique of technological civilization, Myung Su Yang asks: "Is this enough for explaining technology?" and proposes to look at technological civilization from another perspective , that of utopia. "Utopia," says Yang, "is exactly the opposite of sanctity and provides the possibility of emancipation."

When technology is sanctified or made sacred, says Yang, it is reduced to instrumentalism or technologism, which has no place for transcendence. But technology need not be reduced to technologism for it is "not simply a tool" it is a "method or manner of living" that embodies transcendence and truth. Recalling *techne's* root in Greek thought, as an art or skill and its association with *poesis*, meaning to make or produce -- this way of life embodies *techne* as the poetic or symbolic skill of imagining and making a new world – utopia.

Unlike metaphysics, utopianism is not so much interested in "what is" as in "what is not" – in making possible something new. So utopianism is "critical of the present." Following Karl Mannheim, Yang asserts that while ideology serves to justify the status quo, utopia seeks to "deconstruct the present" and bring into a existence something new. "Sanctity attempts to maintain its sacredness by separating the sacred and the secular from each other, while utopia joins the world with 'incarnated transcendence,' never dividing the sacred and the secular." Following Gabriel Vahanian, Yang asserts that "the former is soteriological and the latter is eschatological." Technology, in the poetic sense, "makes human beings a new species," an artificial or cultural creature. For culture is our second nature, the one we assume poetically when we transcend nature and realize our unique humanity as linguistic beings.

Language is the first technology, the one needed to create a human world. Technology in demystifying nature opens us up to our humanity as creatures of language and imagination. "Demystification, humanization and newness exist together. It's the transition from the transcendence of sanctity to the transcendence of utopia" - the same transition witnessed to in biblical eschatology as fallen nature gives way to new creation. The ethical implications of this, says Yang, are exemplified in artificial insemination. An ethic oriented to protecting human nature finds such a practice problematic but an ethic oriented to new creation welcomes it, for our humanity does not reside in our biology but in our poetic capacity to make the child our son or daughter and so "we recognize that mankind can construct life with love regardless of the biological family concept." In this way

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technology makes us new creatures and calls us to new levels of responsibility.

In light of such observations Myung Su Yang suggests that Ellul's assertion that the autonomy of technology is robbing us of our humanity is overstated. The attempt to develop artificial intelligence or cybernetic "expert systems" illustrates the self-limiting character of technologism and the necessity of technology as eschatology and *poesis*, for such systems do not handle the unexpected (the new) well, nor can they decide what is important. For these things human *techno-poesis* is required – the symbolic imagination. Such technology does not eliminate our humanity but calls humans to a more demanding level of ethical responsibility. It is not, as Ellul suggests, according to Yang, a question of "means' replacing "ends" but of new creation. Technology, says Yang, is not so much teleological as it is eschatological. It is about imagination, embodiment, transformation and the future. It is about utopia and new creation. The theological task, as Yang understands it is to affirm optimism and "avoid pessimistic fatalism" by "interlocking human responsibility with the sacredness of God" and refusing to separate religion from technology or the church from the secular. Yang's conclusion suggests the influence of Gabriel Vahanian, for Yang argues, using Vahanian's phraseology, that we must see "the world as the condition of God." This does not mean we simply affirm "the current order of the world," but rather understand "the total otherness of God is the source of revolutionary iconoclasm," which calls this order into question in order to make everything new.

**A Response to Myung Su Yang's Critique**

Myung Su Yang's paper on "Jacques Ellul and Technological Utopia" is filled with wonderful insights but also with some statements whose meaning seems obscure or, at times, even self-contradictory. Many of these, I suspect, may simply reflect the problem of translation from Korean to English.

The Sacred and the Holy: A Key Problem of Interpretation

However, a serious problem is Yang's use of the terms "sacred" and "sanctification" interchangeably in describing Ellul's thought. Ellul would never speak of sacralization as the same as sanctification, nor would he speak of "interlocking human responsibility with the sacredness of God." Ellul viewed the sacred and the holy as opposites, antonyms not synonyms. As a result Yang not only confuses the sacred with the holy but the profane with the secular.

Very early in Ellul's work in *The Presence of the Kingdom (Presence au monde moderne*, 1948) he made a distinction between the terms "sacred" (*le sacre*) and "holy" (*le saint*) and then in *Man and Money* (*L'Homme et L'Argent*, 1954) worked out the alignment of the sacred with the demonic and these distinctions then became definitive for the rest of his work. The sacred, for Ellul, is not a term that can be applied to God or related directly to God. It is part of the order of this world, an order which divides everything into the spheres of sacred and profane. The Holy, by contrast, is directly related to God and manifests the power of God to desacralize the world, rendering it, at the same time both secular and holy. An ethic of holiness, says Ellul, can rehabilitate the sacred, so that institutions become liberated from the demonic powers that distort the sacred. When this occurs institutions once more reflect God's will and God's justice. And whenever that happens, the human city becomes an eschatological anticipation of the city of God. Ellul even goes so far as to claim that the human drive for revolution can be rehabilitated and liberated from the dialectic of the sacred of respect and the profane

(i.e., the sacred of transgression) so as to introduce an apocalyptic moment of genuine change into history.

Ellul on Utopia

It is striking, given Myung Su Yang's topic, that he never refers directly to what Ellul has to say about utopia. For most of his career, Ellul considered utopian thought to be the epitome of what Yang defines (following Mannheim) as "ideology" -- ideas that, while promising change, serve to maintain the status quo. Indeed, Ellul calls utopianism "a consolation in the face of slavery, and an escape from something one is unable to prevent" (*The New Demons*, p. 117). Ellul is quite blunt about this: "I fail to see a positive value in utopian views. They do humanity no good" (*Search for an Image*, pp. 24-25). Utopianism's only purpose is to feed humanity false hopes for a better world that are designed to win their allegiance to the technological order that enslaves and dehumanizes them.

For Ellul, it is apocalyptic thought that plays the role that Mannheim ascribes to "utopian thought" – that of breaking with the ideological order of the present and calling it into question so as to bring about a something new and unexpected -- a transformation of all things in an eschatological moment of new creation. For Ellul, an apocalyptic ethic has the power to desacralize a technological civilization in order to sanctify it (i.e., claim it for God's service), rendering it both holy and therefore secular (i.e. no longer claiming to be sacred or to take the place of God.) When God alone is holy, the world is truly secular, that is no longer subject to the dualism of the sacred and the profane.

The paradox here, of course, is that this leads to the conclusion that Ellul's apocalypticism is, by Manneheim's definition, is a form of utopianism. In fact, Mannheim uses Thomas Muenzer's apocalyptic revolt during the Reformation as an example of what he means by utopianism (*Ideology and Utopia*, p.213) Indeed that was what I argued in my doctoral dissertation some twenty years ago, which was eventually rewritten to became the first single-author book ever published on Ellul's work – *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1981).

The book was based on my doctoral thesis, written under the direction of Gabriel Vahanian, and argued that despite Ellul's protestations against utopianism, Ellul was a utopian thinker. Implicit in my argument was an attempt to reconcile the positions of Ellul and Vahanian whose rhetoric made it seem that they held polar opposite positions on technological utopianism. This argument was later made more explicit in the opening chapter of my book *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (SUNY Press, 1993). There (on p. 48) I put it this way:

> If Ellul is phobic about *utopianism*, Vahanian is phobic about *apocalypticism*, which he equates with an ideological dualism more concerned with changing Worlds than with changing the world. Ellul's work, however, should serve as As reminder to Vahanian (who already acknowledges a large indebtedness to Him) that biblical apocalypticism is not about *changing worlds* but precisely About *changing the world.* Ellul's understanding of the apocalyptic narrative Tradition sounds suspiciously like Vahanian's understanding of the utopian Narrative tradition. The problem is that Ellul fails to appreciate the utopianism Of the very apocalyptic tradition which stands at the center of his thought. By Same token Vahanian fails to appreciate that Ellul's apocalypticism does Really draw on the authentic utopianism of the biblical tradition. Despite their Seeming opposition it does not seem to me that the disagreement between them is substantive. For Vahanian's

eschatological *novum* like Ellul's apocaplypse of the escahatan is nothing other than the presence of the Wholly Other in the here and now which calls into question the sacred order of "reality," making all things new.

If I am right then Ellul might be a more constructive resource for Myung Su Yang's theological optimism regarding technological utopianism than Yang is able to envision in his essay.

To my surprise Ellul wrote me (May 2, 1982), after reading the copy of my book that I had sent him, to say that I had given a completely accurate account of the development of his thought and then went on to say: "You are quite right on the subject of Apocalypse and Utopia. That which makes me uneasy is not at all the thought of Vahanian on the subject of Utopia/Technique. On the contrary, that is very convincing. But it is the word itself, on the one hand, in its historical usage and , on the other hand, as it is used by modern intellectuals -- not at all the way Vahanian understands it."

What I find underdeveloped in Yang's essay is how we make the transition from technology as our fate to technology as the advent of new creation – technological utopianism. Yang sometimes seems to say that by demythologizing the myth of our "human nature" technology automatically leads to utopianism. It would be more accurate to say that this demythologizing opens up the opportunity for new creation, provided technology itself is demythologized. For Ellul, that is the task of an apocalyptic Christian ethic and for Vahanian that is the iconoclastic task of the church in a technological age. The ideology of technologism has to be unmasked, not just in theory but in practice, before utopian possibilities can be realized or embodied in a new way of life that will be at once both holy and secular.

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*Darrell J. Fasching is the Founding Editor of The Ellul Forum. He is a Professor of Religious Studies at the University of South Florida.*

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# Utopia and Hope: A Response to Jacques Ellul and Technological Utopia

## J. Wesley Baker

For those of us living in the highly technological environment of the Western world, we daily see the advantages technology has brought to our lives. Efficiencies in business, advances in medical diagnosis and treatment, changes in approaches to teaching and learning—these are a part of our everyday lives. As Porat's (1977) analysis first revealed, we have come to this point as our major economic base has moved from agricultural to industrial to informational. Those in the Eastern world, whose economies remained agriculturally-based as the West moved through these transitions, have taken note and have often adopted, as national priorities, goals to move to industrial- or information-based economies as quickly as possible. For all of us, East or West, Ellul's sociological critique of *la technique* is inconvenient. His call for us to examine the values of the technological system and the negative impact they can have stands in the way of an unreserved embrace of a system that produces such evident advantages.

These are the kinds of struggles that I believe are at the root of Professor Yang's attempt to find a reconciliation through the concept of "Utopia." The Republic of Korea, through an aggressive program of industrialization and importation of technology, has become one of "Four Tigers of East Asia" and its economy is currently ranked as the 13th largest in the world. Should it put the brakes on its rapid development until it can consider the potentially negative impact a technological system will have on its traditional society? In face of the seeming impracticality of this, there must be a way of finding a positive side to technology. This Professor Yang seeks to do through his "Utopian" approach—one in which we recreate "the present in order to advance toward the new future." He suggests that human use of technology can actualize humans ("With technology, human beings become human beings.") and, at a broader level, can open up opportunities for change, creating "a stage for a new world"—" the unlimited world of imagination" or Utopia. His What has made the study of Ellul's position on la *technique* particularly difficult is his refusal to merge the two analyses into a single comprehensive critique (Ellul, 1970, p. 6). Rather than synthesizing them, as a dialectic thinker Ellul played these two tracks against each other, each of his sociological works countered by a theological work. His work as whole, he explained, "has from the first turned on 'the contradictions between the evolution of the modern world [notably the technical evolution] and the biblical content of revelation" (Holloway, 1970, p. 20; brackets in the original).

In his sociological work, Ellul viewed social development in systemic terms and sought to show us how the technological system would develop apart from our intervention. "I analyze reality," he said. "I see its most probable course of

view is that Ellul's critique masks these possibilities. "Ellul regards technology as an idolatrous religiosity," a position, he argues, that leads to hopelessness in the face of autonomous technology, rather than an acceptance of our responsibility and the possibility of "self-control of technology."

Professor Yang offers a standard criticism of Ellul when he contends, "Ellul's assertion that technology will eliminate a meaningful mankind because of its autonomy is too serious." It is this common reading of Ellul that causes him to look for an alternate view "where technology is set free from mechanics and gets closer to human beings." In this response, I will argue that, when viewed in its totality, Ellul's analysis is not unrelievably pessimistic, but that Ellul presented a hope that is not far from Professor Yang's theological optimism.

To address the question of Ellul's pessimism, let us begin by going back to a written debate between Robert Theobald and Ellul in 1965. Theobald comes to the debate having read *The Technological Society*, so he is familiar with Ellul's statements about the autonomy of technology. Yet, through the exchange, he is taken aback by something Ellul says, something that seems irreconcilable with his assumption of where Ellul stands. I find Ellul's position on this issue ambiguous: he seems at many points in his book *The Technological Society* and in his reply to deny man's power to influence the technological environment. Indeed, at times, he appears to believe in a rather extreme technological determinism. Yet in spite of this, at the end of his reply, he quite clearly states that man can find "the path to a new freedom" (Theobald, 1965, p. 569).

What Theobald bumped up against is a common stumbling block for many of Ellul's critics—the assumption that his sociological critique of la *technique* is all there is. As I have noted elsewhere, "Ellul's work follows two separate tracks—the more widely known sociological works and the less well-known, but crucially important, theological writings" (Baker, 1991, p.10). development, but that doesn't mean I approve of it; on the contrary, what I see is the interaction of blind forces, nature taking its course, and the human role is precisely that of mastering or preventing this chain of events" (Ellul, 1981/1982, p. 46). Thus, *The Technological Society* was written as "a warning of what may happen if man does not come to understand what is happening and makes no attempt to control the situation" (Ellul, 1965, p. 568). But, contrary to the common criticism, this did not lead him to fatalism. He did not "believe in a permanent determinism, in the inexorable course of nature" (Ellul, 1981/1982, p. 106) and "never said that technology was not dependent on anything or anyone, that it was beyond reach, etc." (Ellul, 1977/1980b, p.139). It is only if no action is taken, if people resign themselves to what they see as the inevitable

course, that Ellul speaks of things deterministically. "Fate operates when people give up," he says (Ellul, 1981/1982, p.106). With this background, we can now put into context the statement that caused Theobald such consternation:

> So long as man lulls himself into thinking his perils imaginary, that ready-made solutions exist, or that others will devise a remedy, he will do nothing but wait. I am still convinced, however, that if we can be sufficiently awakened to the real gravity of the situation, man has within himself the necessary resources to discover by some means unforeseeable at present, the path to a new freedom (Ellul, 1965, p. 568).
>
> To summarize, Ellul's sociological works describe how he viewed the development of the system, but—and in each of these statements he consistently adds this condition (though his critics just as consistently miss it)—that development would occur only if we do not intervene to change it. Amid his analysis is the hope of intervention.

This hope is the theme of his religious writings which "confront" the sociological analyses. The "path to a new freedom" may be discovered by those who have been awakened to the likely course of the technological system and seek to intervene in its development. But who can intervene into a system that seems so complete and autonomous? The integrating nature of the technological system leads Ellul to argue that no one within the system can provide us with help in breaking the power of the system. Thus he called for an "exterior intervention," a term that goes back to his 1948 work, *The Presence of the Kingdom*. At its core the call is religious.

The possibility of an "exterior intervention," Ellul (1948/195 1) argues, "can only come from the admission of a superior authority which is imposed from outside on the mind of man, and gives him a rule, while at the same time it restores to him his genuine function" (p. 135). Writing as a Christian, Ellul (1981) says the "Christian Revelation" provides "the outside vantage point that permits the critique of the system" because God is outside the system which binds us (pp. 100, 102). He contends that "Christians in particular are called" to challenge the system of la *technique* "because it is possible for them to see the true situation of man better than other people, and because, better than others, they can see where this ought to lead, and what is its aim" (Ellul, 1948/1951, p. 143). Rather than, as Professor Yang contends, "sanctifying the concept of technology," Ellul's religious argument results in what Christians (1989) calls a "prophetic witness" which "confronts technicism and insists on desacralizing it" (p. 137; cf. Ellul, 1980a, p. 247). In sum, Ellul believed that an "exterior intervention" is possible because of a God who is Wholly Other and therefore completely outside the technological system. Surely this is not far from Professor Yang's argument: "The total otherness of God is the source of revolutionary iconoclasm. Thanks to the otherness of God, the people go to a new world with the hope of a new people. Theology should insist on the otherness of God to prevent technology from falling into technological determinism that is also the spirit which technology embraces."

Professor Yang argues for a positive side of technology, that "[t]echnology should exist for improving human beings." Ellul (1972/1973) recognized the positive contributions of particular technologies, as well. He readily admitted that technology (as contrasted with the technological system) does have a place, that "there is a legitimate use when it is put back into the movement of hope. That is the only place from which one might, with a great many difficulties moreover, rethink the whole problem of technology and come up with the true import of man's tremendous discovery" (p. 237). "What we have eventually to do as Christians," he wrote, "is certainly not to reject technology, but rather, in this technological society and at the price of whatever controversy, we have to cause hope to be born again, and to redeem the time in relation to the times" (p. 232).

Although Ellul did not present us with a program for how to accomplish this, he did, in his religious work, provide hope that we can find a "path to a new freedom." "In aiming a certain number of challenges, objections, and basic criticisms at the foundations," Ellul (1981/1982) said, "we can make Technique change its orientation and begin . . . what we might call a new historical period in which it will once again be in its proper place, that of a means subordinated to ends" (p. 208)—a hope, I would submit, that is the same, in spirit, at least, as Professor Yang's "utopian imagination" which "works toward negating and deconstructing the present, and finally establishing the new system."

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The IJES links together scholars and friends of various specializations, vocations, backgrounds, and nations, who share a common interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912-94), long time professor at the University of Bordeaux. Our three objectives are (1) to preserve and disseminate his literary and intellectual heritage, (2) to extend his penetrating social critique, especially concerning technology, and (3) to extend his theological and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

The IJES is the English-language sister-society of the French-language *Association Internationale Jacques Ellul.* Together, we maintain a web site---*www.ellul.org*---as our common communications link and as a resource for anyone with an interest in Jacques Ellul.

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Jacques Ellul published more than fifty books and nearly a thousand articles and reviews. Our mission is to preserve and make broadly available this great legacy by
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(3) republishing (in electronic as well as print formats) works that are no longer available,
(4) publishing a critical edition of Ellul's complete works in both French and English,
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(6) organizing and making available the audio and video recordings of Ellul's lectures and interviews,
(7) making available an accurate biography of Ellul.

### ☐ extending a critique

Jacques Ellul is best known around the world for his penetrating critique of "la technique"---of the character and impact of technology on our world. The forces and institutions which shape 21$^{st}$ century life and which pose the greatest challenges to the health and future of humanity and nature were Ellul's critical interest. Our mission is to encourage continued research and critical thought in this tradition, with a special focus on technology but also including politics, economics, globalization, education, art, language, communication, religion, and popular culture. The IJES is not an antiquarian society interested only in a reverent inspection of Jacques Ellul's works; it is, in the spirit of Ellul himself, a movement to encourage the extension of a serious critique of technological civilization.

### ☐ researching a hope

Jacques Ellul was not just a social critic but a theologian and activist in church and community. Because of his profound faith in the "Wholly Other" breaking into human history, he refused to become a pessimist about the predominantly negative social trends he studied. He insisted that he was above all a man of hope and freedom and searched for signs of hope in Holy Scripture and in history. Our mission is to encourage continued theological and ethical research on hope and freedom, with a special focus on the Jewish and Christian Scriptures.

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