

# The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Issue 47

Spring 2011

The Emerging Field of Religion  
And Popular Culture  
*Dell DeChant* 3

Pop Culture's "New Demons":  
Obama, the Sacred, and  
Civil Religion  
*Frank Ferreri* 4

Snap, Crackle, Pop Christianity:  
Discerning the Church in the  
Age of Entertainment  
*Stephanie Bennett* 9

Illusions of Freedom: Thomas  
Merton and Jacques Ellul on  
Propaganda  
*Jeffrey Shaw* 19

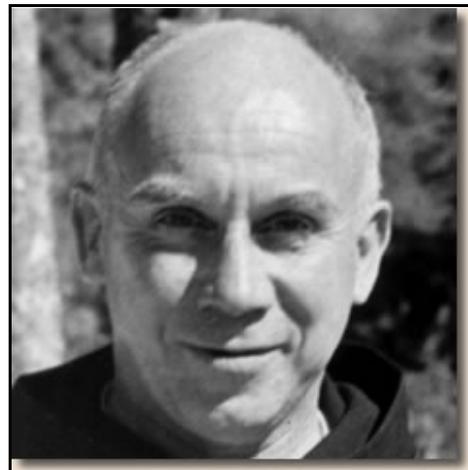
## Book Note

*Jacques Ellul on Freedom, Love,  
and Power*  
Translated and edited by  
*Willem Vanderburg* 23

Call to Meeting & Call for Papers  
Jacques Ellul Centenary  
Conference: July 8-10, 2012 24

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## Pop Culture, Jacques Ellul, & Thomas Merton



# The Ellul Forum

For the Critique of Technological Civilization

Founded 1988

*The Ellul Forum* is published twice per year, in the Spring and Fall. Its purpose is to analyze and apply Jacques Ellul's thought to our technological civilization and carry forward both his sociological and theological analyses in new directions.

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## Publisher

The International Jacques Ellul Society  
www.ellul.org  
130 Essex Street, Box 219  
South Hamilton MA 01982 USA

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# From the Editor

Readers of *The Ellul Forum* over the years have seen its content expand to countries around the world. The North Atlantic axis has welcomed such issues as Ellul in Korea, Mexico, and Denmark. Also, scholarship on Ellul and technology continues to deepen; it's become more intellectually sophisticated over the life of the *Forum*.

With this issue we take note of another development—the multiplying of topics for Ellul studies. Popular culture is the topic here. Through Ellul's theory and method the authors develop a critical assessment of popular culture. Ellul's work on *Propaganda*, his analysis of media technologies in *Humiliation of the Word* and *The Technological Bluff*, are the stepping stones to a popular culture critique. But here the media arts are addressed directly, and it contributes to the expanding scholarship on religion and contemporary popular culture.

One topic of longstanding interest to *Ellul Forum* readers is the Jacques Ellul – Thomas Merton relationship. Jeffrey Shaw's article is included in this issue as a review of the Ellul-Merton critique of technological civilization. Of special interest, it gives an account of their mutual relationship to Kierkegaard and it provides a helpful bibliography of the Merton literature.

Our thanks to Dell DeChant a member of the International Jacques Ellul Society, Board of Directors, for guest editing this issue. The next two issues of the *Ellul Forum* will focus on "Anarchism" (Fall 2011, guest editor Andy Alexis-Baker) and "Ellul and the Arts" (Spring 2012, guest editor David Lovekin).

We celebrate the centenary of Ellul's birth in 2012 with an international conference July 8-10 at Wheaton College --- chosen for its central location near Chicago, its investment in developing the best archive of Ellul books, papers, tapes, and letters west of Bordeaux, and the indefatigable promotion of Ellul studies by Prof. Jeff Greenman. Call for papers on back cover – more registration info in the fall *Ellul Forum*. Let's gather all the Ellul students, novice to veteran, for a great time of celebration and serious reflection together. Plan now!

**Clifford G. Christians, Editor**

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# The Emerging Field of Religion and Popular Culture

by Dell DeChant

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Aside from their scholarly merit as critical inquiries into specific topics at the intersection of religion and contemporary culture, the articles in this issue are of particular interest in two important ways. First, they suggest a greater range of application for Ellul's project, and second, they contribute to the theoretical enrichment of the emerging field of Religion and Popular Culture.

In the first area, these two studies clearly show the relevance of Ellul's general theories and specific categories of analysis to formulating questions and developing critical assessments related to popular culture. In this regard, they remind us that Ellul's theory and method are as pertinent and as applicable today (and in the most immediate moment of the present) as they were in the 60s and 70s. In short, and to use a sports analogy, these studies give Ellul "fresh legs."

In the second area, the studies may make a greater contribution by expanding and deepening the theoretic options available to scholars working in the field of Religion and Popular Culture. The development of Ellul-derived questions and deployment of Ellul-derived categories of analysis not only significantly expand the theoretic horizons of this field, they also add new problematics otherwise absent in the literature.

Ferreri and Bennett are, thus, in dialogue not only with Ellul specialists, but also the broader (and growing) scholarly community concerned with the religious dimensions of contemporary popular culture. For readers unfamiliar with the field of

Religion and Popular Culture, and to briefly contextualize the articles, Ferreri's examination of the Obama presidency exemplifies the category of "Popular Culture as Religion." Questions in this category focus on the ways in which popular culture phenomena function as religion. The relevancy of Ellul's work to this area should be quite apparent. Ferreri's particular interest is the richly nuanced intersection of Civil Religion and popular culture in the person and symbol of Barack Obama. For Ferreri, Ellul serves as a bridge between Robert Bellah's conception of American Civil Religion and the sacred of contemporary popular culture, which yields "the technology of consumption" as the manifestation of the sacred and Obama as "the longitudinal extension of JFK."

Bennett's analysis of contemporary Christian religious communities is located in the category of "Popular Culture in Religion." Inquiries in this area are concerned with the impact of popular culture on religious communities and ritual practices. Again, as with the previous category, Ellul's relevance is self-evident. Using a number of Ellul's texts, most importantly, *The Meaning of the City*, Bennett isolates and critiques the "rippling effects and unforeseen consequences" that are inevitable when churches become enamored of popular culture elements and artifacts, appropriating them without reflection. In this treatment, the world of popular culture is analogous to the Ellulian *city*; and as Bennett observes, following Ellul, "the values of the city are in direct juxtaposition to the values of the Kingdom of God."

It is hoped that these articles will be followed by other studies by our featured contributors, and that others may find merit in the deployment of Ellul's theories and methods as modeled here.

Should this occur, it will benefit not only the theoretic development of the field of Religion and Popular Culture, but also promote the continued evolution of the theories of Jacques Ellul. Ultimately, then, I commend these articles to you

with the observation that Ferreri and Bennett are teaching us that Jacques Ellul's inquiry into religion and culture is as relevant today as it ever was, and perhaps even more relevant today in the world of Barack Obama and the mega-church.

# Pop Culture's "New Demons": Obama, the Sacred, and Civil Religion"

by Frank Ferreri

*Frank Ferreri, M.A. and J.D., is a legal editor at LRP Publications and an adjunct instructor at University of South Florida Polytechnic. He earned his B.A. and M.A. from the University of South Florida and J.D. from the University of Florida.*

Since Barack Obama arrived in the public eye commentators have compared him to John F. Kennedy, a hallmark figure of American civil religion. Naturally, Obama's campaign for and election to the U.S. presidency further amplified such comparisons.(1) Likewise, in much the same way that JFK became an enduring figure in American popular culture, Obama's time in the White House has played out voluminously in the consumer-oriented carriers of popular culture.(2) Thus, a question arises: what is the link in the American popular consciousness connecting Obama to tropes of the American civil religious tradition and how does that manifest itself in American popular culture? In exploring this question, this article considers whether and how, from the view of American popular culture, Obama fulfills civil religious ideals for American society and the degree to which this has implications for the religious dimensions of contemporary American culture.

To conduct this analysis, this article examines the Obama presidency in the context of Jacques Ellul's concept of political religion, as developed in *The New Demons*, and in light of Robert Bellah's understanding of American civil religion, which he first expounded in the wake of JFK's presidency and assassination.(3) Viewing Obama through the intersection of pop culture and civil religion in the context of Ellul yields an understanding of civil

religion that goes beyond Bellah's initial confines. Namely, this type of exploration suggests the possibility that the civil religious sense of the sacred has an embodied, immanent presence in contemporary American culture that combines with its idealistic strands to instruct Americans about their identities, an instruction that comes almost exclusively from the carriers of popular culture.

## Bellah's Civil Religion

For Bellah, civil religion is a "collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity" that is "at its best a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or, one could almost say, as revealed through the experience of the American people."(4) Bellah goes on to explain that though American civil religion is seeped in biblical archetypes, "it is also genuinely American and genuinely new. It has its own prophets and its own martyrs, its own sacred events and sacred places, its own solemn rituals and symbols."(5) It also seeks, in Bellah's view, a God-accorded society that is an example to the rest of the world. Intentionally or not, Obama presented a rendition of this theme in his inauguration address when he announced, "Let it be said by our children's children that when we were tested we refused to let this journey end, that we did not turn back nor did we falter; and with eyes fixed on the horizon and God's grace upon us, we carried forth that great gift of freedom and delivered it safely to future generations."(6)

Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that Bellah publicly supported Obama for the 2008 election.(7) In his

endorsement, Bellah is especially drawn to Obama's deployment of "the language of Martin Luther King Jr. and William Sloane Coffin -- that is, a language that expresses the dominant biblical concern for those most in need, a language that reminds us of our solidarity with all human beings."(8) Bespeaking the nature of Obama's political rise and testifying to the nature of information-spreading in contemporary American culture, Bellah first learned of Obama because of his speech at the 2004 Democratic National Convention, something millions watched on television and read about in papers, magazines, and online.

Viewing Obama through the lens of American civil religion aids in a fuller understanding of how civil religion continues to function in American culture and the relatively central place it still holds in American political life. From a communitarian perspective, Obama's demonstration of civil religious ideals and deployment of civil religious language show that this new phase of history argues in favor of Bellah's understanding. Obama himself has employed it, at times, such as when, prior to his run for president, he wrote of "the need to think in terms of 'thou' and not just 'I'" that "resonates in religious congregations all across the country" and his belief that "democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific, values."(9) Such thoughts are at home with Bellah's supposition that American civil religion is "an understanding of the American experience in the light of ultimate and universal reality."(10)

An important part of Obama's place in American civil religion is his relationship to the African-American church tradition. R. Stephen Warner has asserted that Obama's public disagreement with the Rev. Jeremiah Wright in 2008 was a teachable moment in understanding African-American Christianity, American civil religion, and Obama's ongoing religious pilgrimage.(11) Tellingly, the Wright-Obama episode played out in the media, with Wright drawing intense media attention for a brief time. One could barely turn on any of the major media outlets without encountering some kind of reference to what Obama's relationship to Wright meant for his presidential bid. However, few (with the possible exception of Bill Moyers), asked what the relationship meant for Americans' understanding of themselves. However, Ellul's concept of the sacred supplies an appropriate category for which to conduct this line of inquiry. For Ellul, in the post-Christian

world, the sacred, among other things, is embodied in a person and is, therefore, incarnate.(12) Moreover, the incarnate one "is not in himself the point of reference of the entire world order, but he is the point of reference for all the people, to show them how they should act, how they should appear, and how they should behave toward the sacred."(13) In other words, the incarnate one is the chief repository of all that is sacred and the prime human example of it. The furor over the Wright episode shows that, when it comes to American politics, something of a sacred nature is at play in the American popular consciousness and arrives at its status through the consumption of mass media.

### **Ellul's Political Religion**

Such a notion of the sacred takes on special significance in Ellul's analysis of political religion. For Ellul, simply, "Politics has become a religion."(14) And it is the kind of religion that produces a "sacred" hero who is the "complete model" and "consecrated by a god."(15) In Ellul's assessment, the pantheon of heroes in political religion throughout history serve, among other things, "as examples of the life approved by God."(16) This has remained the case in the modern age because "there is . . . unquestionably the need for moral examples to which to refer."(17) Implicit in this is an arrangement by which the examples set themselves out to a public eager to grasp them as such.

Addressing the nature of public figures, Ellul hints that the exploration of political religion is at home in the context of popular culture. In a somewhat tangential analysis, Ellul considers the way celebrities delve into political religion to become part of the heroization that pop culture attaches to political figures. He explains, "Thanks to political religion, the stars are finding their place. They are at last having a part in serious worship."(18) The early stages of the 21st century make it appear that Ellul was on to something. As the carriers of the cultural myths are ever-commodified, the amalgamation of celebrity, politics, and the sacred increasingly shapes what it means to be an American. Perhaps this is why it is par for the course when Obama makes an appearance on the *Tonight Show* or *The View*. Maybe he is concerned about poll numbers and the seemingly endless cycles of elections; however, he also may be living out how the sacred expresses itself through pop culture to reach people in a contemporary milieu.

## Obama and Pop Culture

With Obama, it can be argued that celebrity and political religious heroism collide. His election made global headlines, prompting Americans of various political persuasions to proclaim him as some version of the American dream and representative of numerous American ideals. If Ellul is right about the sacred, then Obama's pop culture presence argues in favor for Bellah's original interpretation of civil religion. After all, "hope" and "change that we can believe in," traditional civil religious ideals, became not just rallying cries but fashion statements festooned on clothing, plastered on bumpers, and made trendy by Shepard Fairey's artwork. As the campaign commodified ideals, Obama supporters responded, "Yes we can."

Further, looking to Obama's demonstration of American civil religion in the age of "2.0," one cannot ignore Ellul's thoughts on technology, particularly in examining Obama's inkling toward JFK-like policies promoting America's technological innovation and global leadership. For Ellul, technology supplies modernity with a utopian narrative that supports "faith in man, in history, and in science."<sup>(19)</sup> Such a narrative naturally has implications for political religion in Ellul's analysis, particularly where, by narrative, "the technological effort is in perfect conformity with the will of God."<sup>(20)</sup> From there, technology comes to sacralize the society, becoming "the center of the new sacred"<sup>(21)</sup> just as it becomes the hope-giving, faith-deserving force of liberation one would expect from the "god who saves."<sup>(22)</sup>

Thus, building on Ellul, it stands to reason that what is sacred in contemporary American culture relates to its technology. And the technology that features so prominently in the lives of so many contemporary Americans, and so is a means by which the sacred is carried to them, is the technology of consumption. The mass-oriented nature of the various devices that increasingly define Americans' existence has not been lost on Obama. To be sure, Obama takes technology seriously, particularly forms of technology that resonate most emphatically in popular culture. His campaign and administration have made use of social media, e-mail, online videos, and other such instruments like no previous U.S. president. In turn, this has spawned a pop culture take on Obama's technophilia.<sup>(23)</sup> During the 2008 campaign, this presented a contrast that seemed to

resonate in contemporary America, particularly in pop culture: the younger, tech-savvy Obama versus the older, laggardly McCain, who reputedly did not know how to use e-mail.<sup>(24)</sup>

To cite some examples: in late 2008, the pop culture world was all atwitter about whether Obama would keep his BlackBerry once he became president; a Facebook application lets users "Obamaize" their profile photos to look like Fairey's "Hope" posters and stickers; and Obama's weekly address appears on the Web in high definition video with links for viewers to easily share with others through various electronic channels. These are also examples of technology as mass-produced consumer commodities: BlackBerry-like devices are ubiquitous; the Facebook application allows for personalized customization (including replacing the word "Hope" with any word the user desires); and the White House's online videos are intended and encouraged to be widely distributed and consumed (watched). Other examples abound as well and further point to Obama as the mass-market technology politician *par excellence*. However, in many ways, he is the longitudinal extension of JFK, who used television to his advantage and was filmed and photographed frequently for a land of eager media consumers. In Ellul's words it would seem that, much like with JFK's command of America's mass media, Obama's utilization of numerous carriers of pop culture shows a familiarity with "the liturgy of the cult of consumer goods."<sup>(25)</sup>

## Technology in Civil Religion

It would seem, too, that the current place of American civil religion is shaped by the contours of how technology shapes what is sacred and how that, in turn, focuses the narrative of American exemplariness at home and on the world stage. No doubt Obama's use of and affinity for personal and consumer-oriented technology demonstrates his confident foray into sacred pop culture territory, but his 2010 State of the Union address demonstrates his concern for America's international technological prowess, once again resonating with Ellul's consideration of how the sacred functions in the seemingly secular realm of politics. During the address, Obama makes reference to America as the world's technological power and to the threat America's position faces from burgeoning technological powers across the globe. In doing so, he employs civil religious language to sacralize a technology-as-savior narrative about America's

financial crisis and future viability of superpower status. For example, the address contends that America needs to re-establish itself as an economic and technological superpower because countries like China, India, and Germany "aren't playing for second place. They're putting more emphasis on math and science. They're rebuilding their infrastructure. They are making serious investments in clean energy because they want those jobs."(26) Obama goes on to explain, "I do not accept second place for the United States of America" before extolling the virtues of American innovation and high-tech education.(27)

Obama's 2011 address strikes similar themes, calling for national investment in education, infrastructure, and clean energy through metaphorical reference to the gold standard of technological competitiveness, Sputnik.(28) What this shows is that, from Obama's perspective, technology carries ideals worthy of national moral concern, the kind of which is at home in an American civil religious context.

Yet, anyone moderately interested in American popular culture, or at least its middle-brow elements, will note that *New York Times* columnist Thomas L. Friedman has been making those same arguments for years in newspapers, books, on the Web, and on television talk shows. And, interestingly enough, where Friedman makes a case for American investment in green technological innovation, he often makes reference to JFK's civil religious crusade to put a human on the moon before the Soviets. For example, in a 2006 column, Friedman refers to energy independence as this generation's "moon shot."(29) And just as JFK's moon shot changed the face of pop culture in the 1960s, with NASA regularly coming into homes through television, so too, Obama's efforts to reach the public through various electronic media daily put his presidency on Americans' laptops and mobile devices. The important point with all of this is that it appears in mass-consumed form through mass-distributed channels of popular culture and, thereby, mass-oriented carriers of contemporary American culture's beliefs and values.(30)

Such mass-oriented politics is consistent with Ellul's analysis of political religion's call for absoluteness in which "everything is political" and "politics is the only serious activity."(31) It is arguable as to how far Ellul's take extends into the analysis of Obama, civil religion, popular culture, but what makes it worthy of attention is that it plays out and reaches Americans through media channels, most notably

television, talk radio, and the Web. As with other aspects of Obama's candidacy and presidency, what distinguishes him from his political opponents is fodder for media distribution and Americans' consumption. Arguably, that has been true for every U.S. president, with developments in radio then television then the Internet amplifying the reality as the populace gets more and more "wired" (or "wified," as it were). Yet, Obama presents a different case. For one thing, his election, for obvious reasons, remains historic. Importantly, it was the kind of history-making event that is at home in the civil religious context, with Obama supporters and critics alike drawing on "shining city on a hill" language to characterize its meaning for America's position in the world.(32)

Of course, Obama's election is also the kind of history that is at home in the narrative of JFK's social vision, arguably because of its civil religious dimensions. But what makes this all the more powerful is that it is also at home in Ellul's understanding that what a culture holds sacred always has an embodied, tangible persona that lends itself to some form of tactile, consumptive apprehension. In contemporary American culture, that embodiment cannot happen without pop culture, which not only tells the passive observer about a culture's beliefs and values but also tells the culture what is believable and what is valuable. Ultimately, no matter how deep and abstract the meaning of Obama to American civil religion gets, the basic pattern reaches and teaches Americans through popular culture.

Obama's political rise and pop culture status demonstrate at least two things relative to the study of religion, particularly as it relates to contemporary American culture: a) Ellul's concept of political religion has continued to present helpful analytical tools despite major changes in global politics since he published *The New Demons*, and b) Bellah's civil religion thesis has wide applicability in grasping the religious nature of American culture. However, what makes all of this come into view is understanding how studying religion and pop culture yields a deeper, more thoroughgoing understanding of culture. Applying Ellul's analysis of the sacred and political religion to Obama's still-developing place in American civil religious history shows that, potentially, the civil religion thesis needs to include an understanding that the sacred in contemporary American culture has an imminent, embodied presence to go along with its more transcendently abstract ideals. No where is that more apparent than

in popular culture, where Obama, like so many others in the public spotlight, is part of the mass-distributed media package the American public continuously consumes.

## Conclusion

Perhaps it is fitting, then, that Obama's presence in pop culture is the window through which to explore these civil religious possibilities. After all, part of what makes him an embodiment of the sacred in an Ellul-like sense is that he is a living example of the transcendental ideals Bellah isolated in his original piece. In other words, a study of Bellah's work helps to make sense of why so many Americans rallied around Obama in the 2008 election. Yet there is another sense in which there exists a "something else" at play with Obama's overall status in the popular American consciousness, and that something else comes into focus in how Obama's persona enters the realm of pop culture through mass-consumed media avenues. If it does not seem identifiably religious to the average American (and it most likely does not), it only stresses how the sacred moves and functions implicitly in contemporary American culture. As Ellul puts it, "The pomp and exaltation are gone. Everything turns horizontal, direct and human, but no less religious."<sup>33</sup> Though it may seem just a part of the way things are, the "no less religious" is where the study of religion explores the way people learn about reality and their place in it. So too, at the intersection of pop culture, civil religion, and the American sacred, one begins to make sense of Ellul's claim that national socialism, Marxism, and American democracy all play the same roles.<sup>34</sup> A culture's narratives and what it holds sacred have a mutually reinforcing relationship with another, a relationship that shapes and guides the culture regardless of who is cognizant of it.

## Notes

1. A Lexis search returned 1,000 results for "Barack Obama" + "John F. Kennedy" and a Google search produced more than 10,000.

2. For purposes of this article, "carriers" are those vehicles or institutions that bring popular culture to individuals in contemporary American culture. Such carriers include, most notably, television, Internet, radio, and print media, all of which, in contemporary American culture, are dominated by consumer capitalism.

3. See Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C Edward Hopkin (NY: Seabury, 1975 [1973]).

4. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 8, 12.

5. *Ibid.*, 18.

6. Barack Obama, "President Barack Obama's Inaugural Address," January 20, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>

7. See Bellah, "Yes He Can: The Case for Obama," *Commonweal*, March 14, 2008, 8-9.

8. *Ibid.*, 9.

9. Obama, "One Nation . . . Under God?" *Sojourners*, November 26, 2006, 43-47.

10. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 18.

11. R. Stephen Warner, "Civil Religious Revival," *Religion in the News* 11, no. 1 (2008), <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RINV0111No1/Civilreligiousrevival.htm>.

12. Ellul, 55-56.

13. *Ibid.*, 56.

14. *Ibid.*, 170.

15. *Ibid.*, 173.

16. *Ibid.*

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 175.

19. *Ibid.*, 117.

20. *Ibid.*, 37.

21. *Ibid.*, 64.

22. *Ibid.*, 73.

23. See, e.g. Jeff Zeleny, "Lose the BlackBerry? Yes He Can, Maybe," *New York Times*, sec A, November 16, 2008.

24. See, e.g. Richard Sisk, "Mac that can't E-mail?" *New York Daily News*, 18, September 13, 2008.

25. Ellul, 195.

26. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President in State of the Union Address," January 27, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-state-union-address>

27. *Ibid.*

28. Obama, "Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address," January 25, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-state-union-address>. It is worth noting that, with the 2011 address, the White House rolled out an interactive, social media-esque website for the occasion.

29. See, e.g. Friedman, "Bush's Waterlogged Halo," *New York Times*, sec. A, September 21, 2005; "A Green Dream in Texas," *New York Times*, sec. A, January 18, 2006; "Will Pigs Fly?" *New York Times*, sec. A, February 3, 2006.

30. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that during composition of this article, the White House Twitter page featured the following "tweet": "Obama:

'we can't... let China race ahead to create the clean energy jobs & industries of the future.'"

31. Ellul, 199.

32. See Kevin Rafferty, "Audacious Dream No Other Nation can Offer," *South China Morning Post*, 13, November 7, 2008.

33. Ellul, 195.

34. *Ibid.*, 202.

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Zeleny, Jeff. "Lose the BlackBerry? Yes He Can, Maybe," *New York Times*, Nov 16, 2008, sec. A.

# Snap, Crackle, Pop Christianity: Discerning the Church in the Age of Entertainment

by Stephanie Bennett

*Stephanie Bennett is Associate Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Palm Beach Atlantic University in West Palm Beach, Florida. Her doctoral dissertation from Regent University was framed by Ellul, "The Disappearance of Silence: A Dialectical Exploration of the Interpersonal Implications of Personal Mobile Media as Viewed through the Lens of Jacques Ellul's La Technique."*

Glitz, glamour, and the unmistakable air of celebrity - the room is thick with it. The air is electric, pulsing with expectancy. Blue lights stream from behind the

stage setting the tone for what is to come. Super-sized screens descend from each corner and the crowd quiets as the gentle swell of an electric guitar rises to meet its match in a reverberating bass. Then, with the sizzle of a swish cymbal and a sudden crack of the snare drum it all begins.

Welcome to Church 2.0, the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of what was once humbly known as the Body of Christ. No longer broken, battered, bathed in blood and the robes of righteousness, this version is brimming with promises of financial prosperity, a seamless transition

from darkness to light, and all of the wonders of technology that will take us from boredom to bedlam and back again. Just click and you're sure to find an edifying sermon pod cast, a small group of believers exchanging text online to discuss eschatology, or a twitter feed that offers scripture-of-the-day. It's all there in whatever mobile computing network one might choose. Only one problem: *the community of faith is absent*. All of these popular technological experiences remove congregants from the actual presence of other human beings.

In many ways popular techno-culture is paving the way for a virtual church. Online churches and long-distance prayer groups are making up increasingly greater portions of those who practice their faith each day.(1) Some examples of this are websites that allow believers to choose an avatar so they may simulate the experience of receiving the Eucharist.(2) Other instances involve the online presence of traditional churches where members may pay a tithe or offering through a secured web portal.

Music, long a mainstay of worshippers in every expression of the church throughout its 2000 year history, has taken a decisive leap into the world of entertainment. Since the inception of the Gospel Music Association (GMA) in 1964, the place of popular music has moved from the peripheral purview of a concert-going youth culture to a primary focus of activity in a growing number of contemporary church settings.(3) Still many other expressions of the local church blend with cultural goods to include the use of media and technology for ministerial purposes such as evangelism and teaching. Powerpoint, YouTube, celebrity speakers, television commercials, streaming video, the simulcasting of sermons to satellite congregations -- even interacting in virtual worlds such as Second Life -- all these are finding a place in churches throughout the West.(4) Even within the walls of more traditional churches -- Evangelical, Protestant, and Roman Catholic, alike -- such artifacts of popular culture are becoming the norm. These are the crossroads -- a junction on the highway to heaven where religion and popular culture meet -- the Christian version, that is, power-packed with all that is relevant, slick, and efficient. *This* is the Church in the Age of Entertainment.

Before we advance any further, let my bias be clear: It is completely unfair to say that edgy music and a light show cancel the core meaning of the church. It is equally unacceptable to dismiss the need to share

the Gospel message in the vernacular of the day, or to disparage well-intentioned means. Yet, what exactly do these elements accomplish aside from providing the *relevance* that is regaled in so many churches throughout America today? This is an important question to ask, for although the blending of popular culture and religion has significant historical precedence, the contemporary melding of the two is creating an entirely new environment in which Christians throughout the globe meet, transmogrifying Christianity, both in the way it is perceived by those outside the church, and altering the behavior, perception, -- even the very definition of the church -- for those within its walls. Although the Church is largely defined today as an institution, for the purposes of clarity we will interchangeably describe the church with several biblical terms: Family of God, Body of Christ, and *Ekklesia*, or community of faith.(5)

Jacques Ellul, twentieth century philosopher, social theorist, and professor of law and the history of institutions, wrote much that pertained to the intersection of religion and popular culture. Although his area of scholarly focus was primarily the political and religious climate of the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Ellul advanced a connection between the various modes of propaganda and the encroachment of a technological society into the church in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He saw the same forces of propaganda and power at work in the Church as are evident within the wider context of societal institutions. It is this threat of technological tyranny that Ellul explicates in *The Technological Society* along with many of his books in his theological track such as *The Presence of the Kingdom*, *The Subversion of Christianity*, and *The Meaning of the City*, each of which serve to inform this article, a work that seeks to uncover implications of the blending of popular culture and the church. To do so, we will explore Ellul's understanding of the place -- or mission -- of the church in the earth. Then, addressing the emergence of popular culture in the church we will briefly discuss the metaphorical meaning of "the city" and ponder several questions pertaining to popular culture in the church, namely: 1) how might such a blending serve to advance or detract from the mission of the church, and, 2) what (if any) significance does the blurring of popular culture with the church have to do with the furtherance of socio-spiritual interaction among those in the church?

## Presence of the Kingdom

What follows is not a comprehensive assessment of the place of popular culture in the church, nor a complete treatment of Ellulian thought on the matter, but a preliminary exposition that is offered in the spirit of exploration and investigation. It is my fervent hope that these ideas would invite dialogue and help to advance the important questions that need to be asked. Let us begin, then, by engaging with perhaps the most ecclesiastically-focused work in Ellul's corpus, *The Presence of the Kingdom*.

This is Ellul's self-described, "little book, short and easy on the presence of the Christian in the world" (1989, ix). Here, he offers a description of the church and its role in society, stating that "a Christian is a 'sign' of the reality of God's action, [. . .] a sheep in the midst of wolves, [...which is] why it is essential that Christians should be very careful not to be wolves in the spiritual sense – that is, people who try to dominate others." (pp 4-5). As a gathered people, the church functions as a living witness of sacrifice, - the sacrifice of Christ and its outworking in the midst of life together. Herein, the church occupies a very important place in the world, one that does not strive to live a life informed by "rules, principles, or slogans," but lives by a distinctly Christian ethic that is rooted *in Christ, himself* (1989, p.12). The ability to walk in this ethic as a people is beyond the efforts and strivings of human beings; it necessitates living rather by the *life* and redemptive work of Jesus Christ (p. 5). In fact, this life is decidedly agonistic, that is, it is informed by sacrifice and decisive conflict. It is a life that makes a complete departure from the "will of death" and "suicidal tendencies" of the world (1989, p. 19). Thus, we begin to see the fine line that appears between using (or refusing) the propagandistic means of media saturation and consumer-driven techniques that are embedded in popular culture to advance the message of the Gospel.

Although he does not consider the book theology, *The Presence of the Kingdom* is one of the most accessible among his theological works, the essence of which involves what Ellul calls "the situation of the Christian in the world," an ongoing conundrum that finds its application in numerous ways throughout the centuries. What is this conundrum?

To start, it involves individual recognition that the Christian is actually living in two worlds; one, the world of means and techniques, a world in which capitulation to structures of power and organizational

efficiency is mandatory if one wants to survive, and the other, a spiritual life of transcendence in the midst of the material world. This is an existence in which the Christian fully engages in life but recognizes its temporal nature. Pursuit of this life "in Christ" involves wrangling with this tension rather than acquiescing to a universe of means. This tension is dialectical, one that necessitates the ability (and willingness) to deal with the challenges one must face as an active participant in this world while simultaneously understanding that Christians "are not of this world, but belong to the Kingdom of Heaven. This quandary also involves the ability to mitigate the institutional challenges and the responsibility and freedom of individual believers. By no means does this infer that the church is to remove itself from the everyday affairs of society, rather:

Christians are not meant to live together in closed groups, refusing to mix with other people. The Christian community must never be a closed body. Thus if the Christian is necessarily *in* the world, he is not *of* it. This means that his thought, his life, and his heart are not controlled by the world, and do not depend upon the world, for they belong to another Master. Thus, since he belongs to another Master, the Christian has been sent into this world by this Master, and his communion with his Master remains unbroken, in spite of the world in which he has to live. (1989, p 2).

Essentially, this is what Ellul terms the situation of the Christian in the world. Although he approaches "the situation" from several angles, we will deal primarily his thoughts regarding the need for a "revolutionary Christianity."

## Revolutionary Christianity

For Ellul, "revolutionary Christianity" represents a type of faith and presence in the world that does not get swept up into alliance with politics, religion, or any other human system or institution. Rather, it is a Christianity that is distinctively embedded in the community of faith, thoughtful, and serious about its identification with Jesus Christ as Head, Shepherd, and Master. It is clear that by using the term "revolutionary Christianity," Ellul does not intend to stir a physical revolt or war against the government, nor does he imply that the situation of the Christian in the world necessitates becoming a "culture warrior" or warrior of any sort.(6) Instead, he likens the place of both Christians and the church in the

world to what he terms the “revolutionist position” in history suggesting that this position is vastly different from conformists in the past or in the present. To be a revolutionary, Ellul claims, is not the normal course of history. It involves an individual deciding not to follow the beaten path, but to exercise free will in such a way that “he pits against all the constraints and conventions which surround him.” (p. 30). For the Christian, this position is an act of “superhuman effort for the sake of a hope which is beyond himself,” a position that confronts tacit religious thought with the reality of a living, indwelling God who is active in the world (1989, p. 29).

Contrary to what it might appear at first blush, Ellul’s revolutionary Christianity is not wholly anarchistic, but a type of faith that has a peculiar flavor -- a faith that is situated in presence rather than tradition. Much more than an idea or a metaphor, revolutionary Christianity is a daily reality; it is a way of being in the world without succumbing to its ways. Citing Paul’s Letter to the Romans (12:2-4), Ellul describes the relationship of the Christian to society thusly: “Be not conformed to this world,” writes the apostle, “but be transformed by the renewal of your mind. . . .” The importance of these two ideas – ‘be not conformed’ but ‘be transformed’ occupy much Ellulian thought. In fact, in terms of the church’s presence in the earth, they are two sides to the same coin -- ideas that carry over into every aspect of life in the church, from its mode of operation, methods of evangelism and very idea of ministry to its infrastructure, the way it is perceived by others, and its primary function as witness or sign of the reality of God. How this manifests itself in contemporary ecclesial praxis is a major part of the dialectical conundrum embedded in the subject of popular culture and the church.

A prominent example of this problematic is the rash of business model materials, marketing strategies, and church growth consultants used in churches throughout the United States.(7) From Rick Warren and C. Peter Wagner to Jack Hayford and Robert Schuller, the implementation of marketing strategies for church growth and revenue increase is nothing new, but using language and methods that combine marketing models with church life is a trend that has found much traction and seems to be becoming the norm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. An outgrowth of utilizing these techniques is that the church is distracted from its primary function as *a sign* of the active presence of Christ in the world to something that more closely

resembles a business venture, social club, or non-profit charity.

Another example is the traditional role of a single pastor/parish priest whose primary duties are preparation and dissemination of a sermon or homily every Sunday morning. Without detracting from the other valuable socio-spiritual duties taken on by clergy it must be noted that this monologic model diminishes the laity’s responsibility. Because of the long tradition of this model, many churches have become comfortable with a type of pastoral care that values institutional organization over mutuality. The result may be unintended, but adopting organizational models of the business world indubitably fosters hierarchical leadership with “top-down” authority structures rather than a mode of operation that functions even remotely like a family. As it continues, Christians are faced each Sunday with the false idea that the pastor and the building are the most significant aspects of the church. For Ellul, this makes the role of the layman particularly significant and more difficult than the clergy’s role, for, unlike the paid clergy member, the lay person:

[. . .] in particular, cannot be separated from the world, [. . .] for the Christian is not free to lead his life as he would like to do, so also the Christian layman has to submit to a mechanical solidarity which hinders him from playing the drama of his faith. He is part of the whole body of humankind . . . (1989, p 6).

Implications of the layman’s role in the Body of Christ are many; it is a subject about which Ellul has much to say. However, the layman’s role in the church is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, we come to the idea of the City. Just what *does* Ellul mean by “the city?”

### **The City**

For Ellul, the city is symbolic of all that is amiss in the world, from the looming evils of war, organized crime, prostitution, economic injustice, and violence of every ilk, to the mundane repetitiveness of traffic snarls, listlessness, avarice, greed and just plain, old, human boredom. In Ellulian thought, all of this corruption begins with “the city’s curse,” which stems from man’s distinctive step outside of fellowship with God in the Garden, in the Genesis narrative.(8) Writing about this in one of his most riveting works, *The Meaning of the City*, Ellul sought to bring insight to the cyclical struggles of the

Church. In contradistinction to the Garden's representation of a life of organic splendor and vitality, the city is symbolic of a life dependent upon the tools of humanity's own making, and life outside of fellowship with God.

Strategies and plans associated with the city's curse carry over into the church. In particular, when the church mimics the administrative necessities of the city it sets itself up for weaknesses and decline. For Ellul, the city is always a place that is subject to "the sociological claws governing administration," a situation he describes as having dominance in the city.(9) When these "claws" embed themselves into the church the result is disastrous. One ongoing example of this disaster is when the church mimics the administrative necessities of the city and treats parishioners as constituents or clients rather than family members. Rather than nurturing a life-giving communion with God and each other this often leads to dehumanizing effects on personhood. Instead of functioning as the "light of the world" pointing the way to wholeness and salvation, the church reduces itself to a mere religious organization incapable of nourishing the "life abundant" Jesus promised his disciples..

In positing "the city" as the symbolic "construction of man," Ellul describes it as a place where people attempt to divest themselves of the quandaries and uncertainties of the human condition – of all that has resulted from separation from God in the Garden. Rather than flowing in the fecundity of human relationships, life in the city foists the values of the world on its inhabitants. Like Cain, people are drawn to the city in hopes of finding greater freedom and comfort -- a place to call home, a place where life outside the presence of God might be tolerable.

Similar to the association with popular culture, the blending of politics with religion has also been highly influential in reaping a disastrous return. In fact, the infusion of politics into the *ekklesia* represents a defining moment of change for the Church, establishing a means by which the Gospel was no longer primarily spread by the witness of a community of people caring for each other in Jesus' Name, rather this same community coming together by governmental edict. This change did not occur slowly, over many centuries. Rather, once Constantine was converted to Christianity it became not only safer for Christians to express themselves in public, but politically correct. When, in 323 A.D. the Emperor Constantine mandated that the pagan

temples become houses of Christian worship, the newly converted believers were expected to meet each Sunday in a centralized location. Ellul speaks directly to this transformation of the faith when it morphed from a practice that centered in a living, active community of participation and "word" to a sacralized building:

It is evident that when temples dedicated to the gods of Greece and Rome were confiscated and baptized as Christian churches, the very architectural structure would remind people forcibly of the ancient religion, for example, by the division into a sacred place and a "profane" place (*profanum*, 'before the sanctuary') (1989, 61).

This seemingly small change in venue created sweeping changes in early church praxis, moving the "place" of worship to a specific locale rather than a mobile, life-sharing people. The change created a new environment for church life, redefining it as place instead of "a people" or "a family" gathering around the living Word (i.e., Jesus Christ). The church now became "a building," and the gathering of believers became an event rather than "a life" shared together.(10) Over time, what was deemed holy or pious came to be associated with what could be seen, was separate, distinct from culture, and objectified.(11)

The significance of this architectural change must not be minimized. Prior to Constantine and the external and often propitiously convenient conversions to Christianity, early believers gathered house-to-house. Ellul refers to this period of Church history as "primitive Christianity" and explains that:

The first Christians had no particular reverence for the places where believers met and where they heard God's word and celebrated the sacraments. But once such places became splendid imperial buildings and the theory of the sacraments changes, these places, now radically different from others, were invested with the beliefs that appertained to pagan temples. God was *especially* present in such places (1989, p. 61).

Now, instead of the mystery of the Gospel, which was, as Paul described to the local believers gathering in Colossae as "Christ in you"(12) the living, organic expression of the community of faith, the church became demystified, formalized.(13) Whereas, the

faith of those who followed Jesus as the Christ was initially based on Christ as person and *topos*, now, new elements of paganism emerged as the place of worship shifted from the “living temple” embodied by each believer to a particular building, or what soon became known as the “house of God.”(14) This occurrence Ellul refers to as part of “the mutation.” As it takes place in the church “[t]he sense of the sacred thus reappears. What is more, the church is now divided into two parts, like pagan temples. The more profane the other part, where there religious ceremony takes place, is for the priests”(1989, p. 61). And so we see, even from the beginnings of ecclesial history, there was the tendency to bifurcate the Church and the wider culture, separating God’s presence -- what is holy – from his involvement in every aspect of life. A further exploration of this shift is called for if we are to gain insight to the subject of the church and its relation to popular culture.

In the early centuries of Christianity the Church functioned as vibrant community; after Constantine the move toward entrenched institutionalism became more apparent. For some historians this change is recorded as helpful to the expansion of the Christianity, but it so deeply changed the essence and concept of the church that it may more significantly be perceived as a near-fatal gash in the Body of Christ, for as Ellul explains, the “Christian God is a hidden God. Nor can any image of Jesus be preserved or imagined. We have here a religion of the Word alone, and Jesus is himself the totality of the Word, living and not ritualized.” (1986, p. 59) This is not to say that ritual or pagan syncretism did not exist prior to the 4<sup>th</sup> century, rather that the movement away from meeting informally in individual domiciles represents one of the most significant changes, one that not only ushered in many changes in church praxis but also paved the way for the message of Jesus Christ to be presented in a skewed way. Religious acts of worship became increasingly associated with the building rather than with the message or the community. As Ellul describes, “To mark the fact that the church is a sacred place, people had to make certain gestures on entering, such as covering themselves, genuflecting, or sprinkling themselves with holy water. In such gestures we again see belief in the sacred” (1986, p. 62).

How this change in form and environment restructured church practice is a matter of history, but the way it reformulated thinking about the nature of

the church and its definition is a matter that has been less noted. In the meantime, most *everything* changed. Whereas in primitive Christianity the Good News centered on the redemption of Christ and his central place in the midst of believers who gathered as his “body” and community of faith (Acts 2 - 4), in the fourth century the emphasis began to switch from redemption and *koinonia* to organization and place.(15) The church morphed from “a people” to “an event.” The practice of allowing political influence to set the tone for the church in the fourth century was central to the change in the church’s course. All of this is inextricably linked to a devastating mutation of the actual faith, not of the sort that Ellul finds necessary to becoming the sign or witness of the church. Today, popular culture is in a similar position as it is situated to set the tone for contemporary church praxis.

### **Popular Culture and the Church**

Along with secular marketing strategies, business models, and corporate power structures of organizational management, popular culture has played an increasingly significant role in the church, one that often sets the tone and style for services and agenda. This has been evident in previous generations to some degree, but today -- because media are pervasive and ubiquitous -- the artifacts of popular culture have become more akin to a new language than merely tools to help disseminate the Gospel message. The language of popular culture creates an environment in which everything else is understood – including what it means to be a Christian. Media ecologist Peter Fallon discusses this inherent bias, explaining that “[. . .] different media impose upon the societies that make use of them different specific and identifiable – though frequently invisible – metaphysical ‘frameworks’ through which we understand ourselves, our lives, our societies, and our world.” (2009. p. 24) Thus, in many ways, popular culture becomes the message itself.

The various rhetorics of popular culture present in church music, architecture, worship style, and leadership paradigms have long been aspects that influence church functioning, but are especially curious today because of the exponential way they are disseminated through mass media. The reach and influence of popular culture on people and institutions is magnified by an environment of digital media, and thusly require a good deal more critical analysis when considering their use in the church.

We can begin to see this as we look a bit more closely at the relatively recent trend of the melding of popular music with Christianity as the introduction of “Jesus music” in the 1960s.(16) Whereas “Jesus Music,” and then contemporary Christian music (CCM), began as indigenous expressions of newfound faith associated with youth culture, the rock style soon found its way into the local churches and eventually morphed into what is currently called “contemporary worship.”(17) Today, for many congregations “the music” is now synonymous with worship, the words being used interchangeably.(18) William Romanowski paints a vivid picture of this evolution, pointing to the way the popular music found entrée into the church. “In the absence of a critical faith perspective that shapes aesthetic and commercial ventures, CCM adopted the goals and strategies of the secular mainstream commercial market – the culture of celebrity and hyperbole, sensation, consumption, mass identification – and ultimately equated these with doing ministry”(p. 11). Popular music is but one example, but as the artifacts of popular culture appear in the church with increasing force increasing changes appear, ultimately in the framework through which the church understands itself.

Another example of this trend to adopt popular culture as a means to an end appears in the emergence of personal mobile computing. As digital devices become increasingly ubiquitous many local churches have adopted the programs and practices of digital culture. But, just as architecture and music have altered the identity, mission, and perception of the church, the aforementioned expansion of the online church is creating an entirely new understanding of what it means *to be the church*. In one way, this expansion online may seem to disseminate the message with greater expediency and efficiency, but it also completely changes the meaning of the church as actual community of faith/family/body of Christ. Proponents of the online church point to the many ways the message of the Gospel can reach into the lives of those who might never step into a church building, but experiencing the church virtually also helps people avoid the messiness of human relationships. As much as this may seem desirable, without local interpersonal relationships the church becomes little more than another means to express one’s individuality. A highly personal spirituality, something akin to a faith du jour, begins to emerge rather than presence and participation in a local community of faith. It may allow those who are physically disabled to enjoy

sermons, prayer connection, and “discussion” from a distance but simultaneously relieves the responsibility for a local congregation to reach out to those in need of transport.

On the face of it, the infusion of popular culture into the church has some merit if the accepted view of the church is as an agent of societal change whose primary mission is evangelism. However, when that prevailing view is confronted by a more biblical view of the church as Body/Family/Community, popular culture does more than provide a persuasive draw or relevance. Essentially, the blending transforms the experience of the church into something that is far removed from its mission as faithful witness or sign.

Certainly, the changes that transformed the primitive Church into an institutionalized entity occurred over time, but the propensity to substitute form for function has notoriously been a part of every era in the ecclesiastical age. As well, the drive for rank, certainty, and structure has rarely been missing from the church. The desire for centralized, visible power among the people of God has been oppositional to the notion of divine leadership – even in the church -- and this has been so since the beginning of recorded time. How does this relate to the infusion of popular culture in the church? Precisely in that the values of “the city” are in direct juxtaposition to the values of the Kingdom of God, and as the church continues to opt for efficiency, power, and relevance, it will have them, along with all the other ills that are attached to survival in the city. And so, as consumer-driven values grow in prominence within the walls of the church more people may be drawn to visit, and even declare that they are Christians, but what they are receiving is often far removed from the pure Gospel.

Understanding Ellul’s stance on the Kingdom of God and applying his metaphor of the city one might see that being part of the *ekklesia* of God has more to do with presenting an alternative way of life than being relevant or approachable to the wider culture. Rather than living in the chains of “the city,” Christians are called to live differently. How so? Simply, the church is called to “love one another” and in that love and mutuality, walk in freedom from the powers and structures that produce institutionalized mentalities in the world.(19) Key to understanding this radical call is the importance of grappling with the fact that all the violence, corruption, and oppression that has been ever-present in ‘the city’ has no place *in* the church, that is, as a part of the church’s government or organizational structure. The church, as totally

separate from the world, exists to function in a way that is distinctively different from the competitive, money-seeking, power-tripping corruption of the world's systems, whether these values are enshrined in politics, a consumer economy, or the popular culture of the day. Yet, in understanding the decisive conflict associated with the "city's" moral and death-laden weight Ellul emphasizes the utter importance of the church's mission in the world to be fully present. He writes: "... it is by placing themselves at this point of contact that Christian can be truly 'present' in the world and can carry on effective social or political work, by the grace of God." (1989, p. 20). Essentially then, the church's form is not consistent with its primary function.

### Summary

In dealing with the perplexities of our time many church leaders look to popular culture as the great equalizer – an aspect of life that is common to all, namely, a means of equalizing or leveling the field of engagement among Christians of such diverse background and belief. Seen as a means to engage those who are not believers and draw them into the community of faith, these leaders seem to have placed hope in the idea that because it is a commonplace, pop culture will have a harmonizing, coalescing effect. Using popular music, film, television programming, YouTube clips, and social media, the hope is that it will simply make the church relevant to a new generation. This may make much sense except for one thing: the artifacts of popular culture become so entwined with the message that they soon become the ground upon which Christians meet – that which they have in common instead of the true ground of the church, which is Christ. This is no small thing, for the centrality of Christ in the church is the key differentiator between social clubs, community organizations, and every other human association that is not the church.

To be clear, my aim in this explication is not intended to thwart the church's engagement with the wider society through popular culture or deny its possible usefulness. Nor is this the tact taken by Ellul in his critical examination of the church as it intersects with the wider world. Rather, it is to uncover the rippling effects and unforeseen consequences of this approach; to create awareness that these techniques work like yeast to dislodge and distract the church from its core mission, which is primarily *to be* that family/body/community – sharing life together in the *ekklesia* – a gathering that is free from the demands

of the city-- free to be a sign and a witness to the wider society.

In these pages I have made no pretense to supply the reader with a comprehensive treatment of Ellulian thought regarding the church. Instead, grappling with several key Ellulian concepts I have aspired to "stir the pot" of contemporary ecclesial thinking about the relevance of popular culture, for the proponents of popular culture in the church fail to realize that as the music, film, poetry and the rest of popular culture make their way into normal church practice, these things become a new language, shaping, reforming, restructuring reality. This new reality is often antithetical to the organic nature of the church, placing focus on "fitting in" with the many media-driven cultural expectations rather than proclaiming a solution to the dullness and vanity of worldly pursuits. Ultimately, then, not only is popular culture mostly irrelevant to the church's mission, but its blurring with the church ultimately makes it even more difficult to discern the church in the midst of the world. Why? Because it is embedded in the structure of power that mimics that of corporate America, celebrity, entertainment, and the market (in general) that makes the church about "being relevant" rather than "being family." Without the family/body/community foundation of the church all else built upon it is doomed to crumble. The church, like salt "loses its savor" and ceases to be that faithful witness to a different quality of life, the life "in Christ" that Ellul so avidly proposes.

Escape from the city is no small task. As the overlap between religion and pop culture becomes more entrenched, the differences between the two become increasingly indiscernible. If the church is truly all about the number of bodies in the pews, expansion of the property, the size of the sanctuary, and the "reach" of the pastor's voice, then using the artifacts of popular culture as a mechanism to attain these goals may work. But, if the mission of the church is to remain more closely aligned with the biblical metaphors of body, family, a community of faith, the artifacts of popular culture will not – cannot – serve as the glue that holds the church together in cultural relevance.

### Notes

1. Hundreds – even thousands – of websites offering "online church" are available to "join" or visit. Clicking into prayer, sermons, and the sacraments is now becoming commonplace. One

example is the CBN.com Prayer and Counseling Center. 2010. [Retrieved June 19, 2010] <http://www.cbn.com/SpiritualLife/prayerandcounseling/>. Another is the Alpha Church, where one may get baptized or receive holy communion. For more details, click on this link: <http://www.alphachurch.org/>. To “participate” in worship, click here: <http://www.alphachurch.org/worshipmusic10.htm> [retrieved June 24, 2010].

2. See Savior.org for details. Managed by the Holy Spirit Adoration Sisters, Philadelphia, PA. 1916. [Retrieved June 19, 2010] <http://www.savior.org/devotions.htm>. This group cites papal authority in going to the Net to function in an ongoing virtual adoration of the Eucharist.

3. The Gospel Music Association (GMA) recognizes a wide variety of genres: urban, pop, rock, Rap/Hip Hop, bluegrass, alternative, and traditional Gospel music. All of these genres have found their way into contemporary church settings.

4. Developed by Linden Research Inc. Second Life is the trade name for a virtual environment for social interaction. <http://secondlife.com/>. LifeChurch.tv was one of the first organizations to set up virtual church in the popular game site, Second Life. [retrieved June 19, 2010] <http://swerve.lifechurch.tv/2007/03/12/lifechurchtv-has-a-second-life-church-campus/>.

5. *Ekklesia* is the Greek term used by Paul of Tarsus to describe those gathering to worship. Literally, “gathering” or “assembly,” it refers to those called out of a larger body to assembly together for a specific purpose. In the case of the New Testament, this purpose was to gather to declare the message of Jesus Christ, worship together, and share in the *koinonia*. *Koinonia* is the Greek word used to express kinship and close, shared, life together.

6. Some 21st century pundits use this term as a means to express the need to return to more clear-cut traditional values. Others, theologians and opinion leaders such as Andy Crouch, Charles Colson, and others have framed the need for such a return as a fight or war to redeem culture. See details at: [http://www.culture-making.com/about/andy\\_crouch/](http://www.culture-making.com/about/andy_crouch/) and “About us” at <http://www.breakpoint.org/about-bp>.

7. Among the many examples of this trend is the following church growth consultancy business that promises to increase revenue and numbers. Earl B. Hall, professional coach and internet marketing. “How to Grow Your Ministry – church growth that works.” June 7, 2010. [retrieved June 30, 2010]

<http://www.earlhall.net/internet-marketing/how-to-grow-your-ministry-church-growth-that-works/> For more examples, see also Ken Godevenos, Accord Resolution Services; 2010. [retrieved June 30, 2010] [http://accordconsulting.com/?page\\_id=158](http://accordconsulting.com/?page_id=158). Also of note are the following websites: <http://doubleyourchurchattendance.com/?gclid=CivOkf2WyKICFQHGsgodkhBk5w>, and <http://www.churchcentral.com/article/Translating-Church-Growth-theory-into-action>

8. To understand his concept of the city in greater depth Ellul draws readers’ attention to the beginning of recorded history to locate one of the earliest examples of this curse. Here, in the book of Genesis we see Cain, son of Adam and Eve, who built the first city, a place that he named after his son, Enoch. Cain was cast out of God’s presence because he murdered his brother, Abel, and instead of humbling himself and acknowledging his evil deed, the son of Eve determined to find a way to survive on his own. Cain, therefore, continued the separation from his creator which began in the Garden, and relying on his own natural resources continued – in a sense -- to eat of the fruit of his own knowledge of “what is good.”

9. An interesting correlation with Ellul’s view is found in the New Testament in Hebrews 13:12-14, which reads: “Jesus also suffered and died outside the city’s gate in order that He might purify and consecrate the people through the shedding of His own blood, and set them apart as holy – for God. Let us go forth, from all that would prevent us, to Him outside the camp . . . For here we have no permanent city, but we are looking for the one which is to come.”

10. As Winston Churchill wrote: “We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us,” so the structural organization of the city shapes the church as it takes root. Winston Churchill, British House of Commons, Oct. 28, 1943.

11. Ellul explains this exchange further when writing about the way the visible indemnifies the sacred. “the visible that characterizes the sacred makes a massive entry into the church, and in this way believers unwittingly take the path of paganism. The visual object is typical of the sacral world and very quickly becomes sacred itself” (SOC p. 65).

12. The “you” here is plural. Paul was writing to a gathering of believers in Colossae, not an individual reader.

13. Colossians 1: 20-27 Paul, the itinerant apostle/preacher is speaking to the church in Colossae. The “you” is plural, but often interpreted by those reading the Bible as indicative of the

individual. When read in the correct context it is clear that Paul was directing his greetings and admonitions to the church as a people – a community – not a place.

14. *Topos*, a Greek word meaning “place.”

15. *Kononia*, shared life together, was practiced throughout the first century as a way of life. This “shared life” was not always communal as it appeared to be in the early chapters of the book of Acts, but it did involve the *communion*, or coming together of the young Christians over shared meals and shared responsibility for the vibrancy of the church.

16. In the 1960s music became an influential force in the church and has since been known as CCM (Contemporary Christian Music) or CCW (Contemporary Christian Worship).

17. The “CCM” term was apparently coined by the founder of *CCM Magazine*, a holy version of *Rolling Stone* just for Christians.

18. Throughout civilization, music has served many communicational purposes, carrying the stories of families and tribes from generation to generation through whatever popular medium of the day. “Whether it is spoken, written, or sung, reiteration of the meta-narrative or “the story” of God’s intervention with humanity plays a primary role in the formation of one’s faith. When the message is embedded in as powerful a medium as popular music as it is in other expressions of popular culture such as film, television, radio, and literature and drama, the persuasive influence of the message is magnified. It may even be said that music becomes a language through which the Spirit can speak and a means by which tribes can communicate the sacred truths of their history with each other. Excerpted in part from: Bennett, Stephanie. “Contemporary Christian Music Goes Digital,” *Understanding Evangelical Media*. Eds. Q. Schultze and R. Woods. Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press.

19. 1 John 4: 7-8 is one among many of the teachings of Christ that focuses the attention in the church to a call to love – not just “the world,” but each other. In fact there are over fifty mentions of “one another” in the New Testament alone, each nudging the new believers in the first century to relate to one another in kindness, generosity and as a family. “Love one another, deeply from the heart...”

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# Illusions of Freedom:

## Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul on Propaganda

### by Jeffrey Shaw

*Jeffrey Shaw is a graduate student and adjunct professor at Salve Regina University in Newport, RI, and an instructor in the Strategy and Policy Department at the Naval War College. This paper will be expanded upon in a doctoral dissertation on the impact of technology on the human condition in the thinking of Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul.*

“Reading Jacques Ellul’s book *The Technological Society*. Great, full of firecrackers. A fine provocative book and one that really makes sense. . . I wonder if all the Fathers [currently convened in Rome] are aware of all the implications of a technological society.”(1)

What would Thomas Merton, a Roman Catholic monk, find so interesting in the writings of a French Protestant philosopher? What would compel Merton to mention Ellul’s thoughts on the technological society in his journal? It turns out that Merton and Ellul actually have a great deal in common. Their respective views on the condition of society in the middle of the twentieth century are remarkably similar. This paper examines Merton’s and Ellul’s views on propaganda, some intellectual antecedents to their thinking, as well as the connections between Ellul’s view of the concept of technique and Merton’s view of the “mass man.”

While some Americans are familiar with Thomas Merton’s writing, few are familiar with Jacques Ellul. A French philosopher of the mid twentieth century, Ellul has been described as both a scholar and a lay ecclesiastic.(2) Ellul’s style is often considered verbose and dense, and his work should be approached as a whole rather than trying to figure out his worldview through reading only one or two of his major works. While it is not the intent in this paper to examine his worldview and his extensive writing on Christian faith, there is one topic that will need elaboration, and that is his concept of *technique*. This

fundamental idea is central to most of Ellul’s writing on modern society and on the condition of the modern world and man’s place in it. In order to understand Ellul’s central thesis, and also to understand the similarities between Merton’s and Ellul’s points of view regarding the condition of man in the modern world, it is first necessary to address the concept of technique.

#### **Ellul’s *La Technique***

Ellul defines *la technique* as “the totality of methods, rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency in every field of human activity”(3) It is important to distinguish the idea of *technique* from technology itself. The products that result from advanced technology should be seen as only the most visible manifestation of technique. As Ellul clearly states, *la technique* pervades every field of human endeavor, whether it be politics, medicine, or education. Propaganda is a phenomenon which is also subject to the demands of *technique*, but there is a symbiotic relationship between technique and propaganda. Ellul states, “I want to emphasize that the study of propaganda must be conducted within the context of the technological society. Propaganda, which is defined as information presented to compel individuals to act in a certain, preconceived manner, is called upon to solve problems created by technology, to play on maladjustments, and to integrate the individual into a technological world. In the midst of increasing mechanization and technological organization, propaganda is simply the means used to persuade man to submit with good grace.”(4) It is along this line of thinking that we see the first comparisons between Ellul’s thoughts on propaganda as contrasted to Merton.

#### **Merton’s “Mass Man”**

Thomas Merton is a well known Catholic author and monk. He is the author of *The Seven Storey Mountain*

as well as numerous other books and stories. Like Ellul, Merton was concerned with the moral and spiritual state of the world and sought to not only explain how man had come to such a state, but how to transcend the situation as well.

While Merton never met Ellul or corresponded with him directly, there are citations in Merton's journals that reference the idea of technique, as well as numerous topics in Merton's writing that correlate quite well with the concept of technique in general. Merton's views on propaganda—its nature and its effect on modern society—are quite similar to Ellul's.

While Ellul presents his idea of technique as the primary obstacle to human fulfillment, Merton presents the idea of the "mass man" in many of his works. The mass man is essentially one that has surrendered the autonomy of a thinking individual for the comforts and conveniences of the modern world. In other words, mass man can be seen as the man or woman unknowingly cast into an allotted position in society based on the unseen and all powerful demands of technique. Merton says of this person "The inner life of the mass man, alienated and leveled in the existential sense, is a dull, collective routine of popular fantasies maintained in existence by the collective dream that goes on, without interruption, in the mass media."(5)

What role does Merton ascribe to propaganda? Much like Ellul, he sees propaganda as conditioning man to accept the reality of his condition as mass man. Merton believes that "action is not governed by moral reason but by political expediency and the demands of technology—translated into simple abstract forms of propaganda".(6) He goes on to say that this propaganda conditions the mass of men and women to react in a certain way to various stimuli.

Merton mentions Ellul specifically in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. Referring to propaganda, Merton states that "Jacques Ellul shows that a mass of factual and correct information can, even if not illogically presented, have the same effect as completely false and irrational propaganda."(7) While Ellul and Merton both spend some time in their respective writing dealing with particular forms of propaganda, such as Communist and Capitalist propaganda, not to mention Nazi propaganda, it is in a general, all encompassing propaganda that is found in the mass media, such as the press, television, and through advertising that the similarities between Ellul and Merton on the topic of propaganda are most pronounced.

Both Ellul and Merton share the idea that man cannot choose to disregard the message that is continually broadcast through propaganda. According to Merton, one of the primary reasons for this is that in the West, it is customary to assume that technological progress is seen only as something inherently good, as well as *inevitable*.(8) The idea that technological progress is inevitable is congruent with Ellul's explanation of automatism as a defining characteristic of technique. Ellul explains that technique is self-augmenting, as he writes in *The Technological Society*, "let no one say that man is the agent of technical progress . . . and that it is he who chooses among possible techniques. He can decide *only* in favor of the technique that gives maximum efficiency. But this is not choice."(9)

Merton shares a similar observation concerning freedom and choice when he states, "Because we live in a womb of collective illusion, our freedom remains abortive. They can never be used. We are prisoners of a process, a dialectic of false promises and real deceptions ending in futility."(10) Merton's view that technical progress is inevitable is similar to Ellul's view that technique determines its own path, irrespective of man's choices. Regarding choice, "Merton saw the effect of the secular myth of progress as a surrendering of human freedom and spontaneity to an unseen yet pervasive principle of efficiency that promises to fulfill our desires if we accept our roles as cogs in the machine."(11) Here we see similarities to not only the role of technique as defined by Ellul, but also the notion that our desires are fulfilled for us, and that it is through propaganda that these desires are both manufactured and made known to us.

Merton hoped for some degree of control over technology. He recorded in his diary that "those who foresee and work for a social order—a transformation of the world—[must work] according to these principles: primacy of the person . . . control of technology . . . etc.(12) Control of technology can be seen in this light as either the freedom from the demands of technique, or a refusal to continue to participate in the mindless consumption so prevalent in American society as Merton goes on to say in the same diary entry, "primacy of wisdom and love, against materialism, hedonism, etc."(13)

Merton's reading of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* influenced his thinking on the relationship between man and technology. While it is sometimes difficult, as we have seen, to distinguish in Merton's writing between his opposition to the products of technology and the process of technological

“progress,” it is clear in his reflection on Arendt that his opposition is to the process itself. This line of thinking more clearly parallels Ellul. Merton notes in his journal that Arendt believes that “Being has been replaced by process. The process is everything. Modern man sees only how to fit without friction into productive processes and in this he finds ‘happiness.’”(14) This thought is remarkably congruent with Ellul’s observation on the effects of technique although there is one major difference. Merton seems to imply that man has chosen to fit himself into the process whereas Ellul would argue that technique molds man into the process unknowingly. For Ellul, technique determines its own path, whereas Merton, in his reflection on *The Human Condition*, seems to imply that man has chosen to go along with process willingly, yet without adequately reflecting on the price he has paid.

Soren Kierkegaard’s writing is an antecedent to the thought of both Ellul and Merton. In *The Present Age*, Kierkegaard, a Danish philosopher of the mid-nineteenth century, presents the concept of leveling. Examining this idea will lead us to conclude that both Ellul and Merton have incorporated some of its basic tenets into their own thinking on the condition of man and society in their age, which is about a century after Kierkegaard.

### **Kierkegaard as Antecedent**

Soren Kierkegaard refers to leveling as an “abstract power.”(15) He also refers to his times as an “age of advertisement and publicity.”(16) The notion of advertising is important to the process of leveling, through which man is forced into a herd-like existence, devoid of passion and individuality. Describing the forces responsible for the process of leveling and its results, Kierkegaard states that “the Press is an abstraction . . . which in conjunction with the passionless and reflective character of the age produces that abstract phantom: a public which in turn is really the leveling power.”(17) Merton picks up on this theme in his own writing when he states, as we have already seen from his quote in *Mystics and Zen Masters*, that “the inner life of the mass man, alienated and leveled in the existential sense, is a dull, collective routine of popular fantasies maintained in existence by the collective dream that goes on, without interruption, in the mass media.”(18)

Kierkegaard makes a point to stress that his age is lacking in passion. Both Ellul and Merton also make

reference to their societies lacking passion. Merton says that Western society is in the grip of pseudo-passion, “fabricated in the imagination and centered on fantasies.”(19) Ellul claims that in his view, technique “attacks man, impairs the source of his vitality, and takes away his mystery.”(20) In presenting an idea that corresponds to both Kierkegaard’s leveling process and to the idea of technique as a force which will act on all men, Merton states that “the abstract leveling process, that self-combustion of the human race produced by the friction which arises when an individual ceases to exist as singled out by religion, is bound to continue like a trade wind until it consumes everything.”(21) Ellul does not specifically reference any of Kierkegaard’s philosophy or his ideas in general in *Propaganda*, but he does make reference to him in *The Technological Society*. He states that “In the middle of the nineteenth century, when technique had hardly begun to develop, another voice was raised in prophetic warning against it. The voice was Kierkegaard’s. But his warnings . . . were not heeded. They were too close to the truth.”(22)

### **Conclusion**

We can see that examining Jacques Ellul’s and Thomas Merton’s writing on propaganda, it would appear that we have little hope of recapturing anything resembling an authentic human life outside of the bonds of the mass. However, at least one of the two writers offers us hope. Thomas Merton believes that through *kenosis* and *metanoia*, one can begin to escape from the bonds imposed on society by the twin pillars of spiritual malaise and the increasing demands of modernization, secularization, and “progress.” *Kenosis*, or the self-emptying that one finds in the mystical traditions, is one of the great lessons that the West can learn from the East. *Kenosis* is an ego-shattering practice.(23) *Metanoia* is a Greek word for the concept of total personal transformation.(24) Emphasizing either of these practices and focusing on spiritual renewal through contemplation, one can transcend the mass. However, Ellul offers us no way out of our predicament. His assessment of technique is more of an autopsy of modern society than any kind of remedy for escaping the grip that technique holds on us all. Concerning the completion of the edifice of technical society, he says that “it will not be a universal concentration camp, because it will be guilty of no atrocity. It will not be insane, because everything will be ordered...we shall have nothing more to lose, and nothing to win...we shall be rewarded with everything

our hearts ever desired...and the supreme luxury of the society of technical necessity will be to grant the bonus of useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile.”(25)

Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton share many similarities when it comes to their views on the nature of propaganda. They both see propaganda as a force that compels man to accept his position in a technological society, as in Ellul, or as the mass man, as per Merton. They can both be seen to have intellectual antecedents in the philosophy of Soren Kierkegaard. While Ellul offers us no hope of liberating ourselves from the clutches of propaganda, Merton offers us at least some consolation in the form of ascetic withdrawal and moral renewal.

### Notes

1. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life*. Edited by Robert Daggy (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1997): 159-160.
2. David Menninger, “Jacques Ellul: A Tempered Profile.” *The Review of Politics* 37 no. 2 (April 1975): 235.
3. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*. Translated by John Wilkerson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964): xxv.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda*. Translated by Konrad Keller & Jean Lerner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965): xvii-xviii.
5. Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961): 268.
6. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (New York: Image Books, 1965): 65.
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8. Thomas Merton, *Turning Towards the World*. Edited by Victor A. Collins (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996): 4.
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10. Thomas Merton, *Raids on the Unspeakable* (Abbey of Gethsemani: New Directions, 1961): 14.
11. Christopher J. Kelly, “Thomas Merton’s Critique of Technological Civilization,” *The Ellul Forum* no. 21 (July 1998): 5.
12. Merton, *Turning Towards the World*, 10.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.
14. *Ibid.*, 11.
15. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*. Translated by Alexander Dru (New York: Harper & Row, 1962): 52.
16. *Ibid.*, 35.
17. *Ibid.*, 64.
18. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 268.
19. Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, p. 32.
20. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 415.
21. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 264.
22. Ellul, *Technological Society*, 55.
23. Henri Nouwen, *Thomas Merton: Contemplative Critic* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1975): 83.
24. Paul Dekar, “What the Machine Produces and What the Machine Destroys: Thomas Merton on Technology.” *The Merton Annual* 17 (2004): 219.
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# Book Notes

## ***Jacques Ellul On Freedom, Love, and Power***

Compiled, edited, and translated by

**Willem H. Vanderburg**

University of Toronto Press, 2010. 247 pp.

Willem Vanderburg is the long-time Director of the Centre for Technology and Social Development at the University of Toronto. He is the author of *The Growth of Minds and Cultures: A Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Experience* (1985), *The Labyrinth of Technology* (2000) and *Living in the Labyrinth of Technology* (2005) a massive attempt to analyze, understand, and explain in depth our contemporary civilization. Vanderburg's 1981 interviews with Jacques Ellul were edited and published as *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work* first in 1981, and recently in an expanded edition (2004).

Vanderburg was a postdoctoral fellow in Bordeaux, studying with Ellul, from 1973 to 1978, He has been a tireless, impassioned promoter, organizer, and interpreter of the legacy of Jacques Ellul. *Jacques Ellul On Freedom, Love, and Power* may be Vanderburg's most interesting contribution yet. A fuller review of Ellul's work here as edited and presented by Vanderburg will have to await another time but here is an introductory note.

This volume is Vanderburg's edited translation of audio tapes of some of Ellul's Bible studies (over 200 of which are archived in the Ellul Collection at Wheaton College). Part One is Ellul's Bible studies on Genesis 1 – 3, taped by Vanderburg. Part Two is Ellul's studies of Job 32 – 42, taped by Dr. Franck Brugerolle. Part Three is Ellul's studies of the parables of the kingdom of heaven in Matthew's Gospel, taped by Vanderburg. Part Four is a brief study by Ellul of the opening of John's Gospel. Vanderburg concludes the book with his own summary of Ellul's amazing exposition of the Book of Revelation.

-David W. Gill

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