

The Sacred, the Secular and the Holy:

The Significance of Jacques Ellul's Post-Christian Theology for Global Ethics

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Technique, Globalization and Apocalypse

In the beginning was the word, and the word gave birth to technique, for through language humans are able to imagine new worlds and devise the means create them. Among the earliest techniques to be invented were the techniques of agriculture which gave birth to the city through the domestication of plants and animals. Technique gave birth to the city, and then, in turn, the city became the midwife of all further techniques of the human, making possible over the centuries the emergence of the technological phenomenon, the comparative selection of the most efficient techniques in every area of human development. And with the self augmenting autonomy of technique came globalization -- a global totalism that, according to Ellul, threatens the disappearance of our very humanity. What drives this totalism is the sacralization of technique which domesticates us to its necessities by promising us utopia. Seduced by the utopian ideology of the technical society that promises to fulfill our every hope and dream we have surrendered our freedom and autonomy. So Ellul tells us: "The stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam" and we will have the luxury of a "useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile (*The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, Random House, 1964, pp.426-427)."

Globalization is the product of the growing interdependence of cultures through emerging global techno-economic and socio-cultural networks that the technological phenomenon requires. This process generates a generalized apocalyptic anxiety -- an uneasy sense that the world as we have known it is coming to an end. In a world of instant global communication and jet travel, time and space shrink and force a new awareness upon all the inhabitants of the earth. For these networks transcend local and national boundaries, and in the process they decenter and so challenge all previous forms of authority and identity, both religious and non-religious.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

("The Second Coming" p. 91, in *The Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, edited by M.L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

William Butler Yeats, in his poem *The Second Coming*, written in just after WWI, aptly captures the apocalyptic postmodern mood created by an emerging global civilization. Yeats' description became even more apt after WWII, for the appearance of the atomic bomb united the world in a common dread -- the dread of an apocalyptic global nuclear annihilation. After two world wars, the apocalyptic anxieties of decentered civilizations, each seeking to shore up its sacred way of life against the further invasion by other sacred ways of life via global media, global corporations and global travel, gave birth to new age of global terrorism. The global terror of nuclear annihilation of the late 20th century driven by the standoff between the USA and the USSR gave way to new terrorist permutations. The most notorious of the new terrorists, Osama bin Laden, who sought to explain his 9-11 attack on the twin towers of New York city in terms of the sacred and the profane, arguing that his goal was a global campaign to put a stop to the violation of the sacred lands of Islam by the profane West.

Western colonialism and two world wars forced globalization on human consciousness. In his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, translation 1984, French 1979) Jean-Francois Lyotard provided a vocabulary by which we could explain to ourselves what was happening. Decentering, he said was a mark of the collapse of the world's great metanarratives.

Even before we humans knew we lived on a globe we sought a global understanding of our humanity. As with the ancient philosophy of Stoicism's attempt to foster a global cosmopolitanism by asserting that to be human was to share a universal "logos" or "reason," the great religions also aspired to universality suggesting that what all humans have in common is God, or Brahman or Tao or Buddha nature (cosmic interdependent co-arising) etc. These religions offered what Lyotard called metanarratives (cosmic myths) that formed transcultural civilizations: Hindu civilization, Buddhist civilization, Jewish, Christian and Islamic civilizations. And then there is the most recent metanarrative – the utopian myth of scientific progress (whether in its Capitalist and Marxist versions) which came in the wake of the Enlightenment and secularization.

Each of these civilizational metanarratives provided a normative center defining what it means to be human. Globalization forces the clash of all such metanarratives and as a result, decenters all of them. Globalization and postmodern culture are two sides of the same coin in which apocalyptic rhetoric aptly catches the mood of the collapse of these metanarratives. The great cities of the world have become microcosms of the religious and cultural diversity of the globe. In the wake of WWII, the borders of civilizations interpenetrated as a result of mass media, global corporations and international travel and provoked and expressed this apocalyptic panic in anti-colonialist reactions to the totalism of dominant metanarratives, often turning poetic apocalyptic angst into literal apocalyptic scenarios in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and New York City (Sept. 11, 2001).

Globalization created the postmodern city. Our great cities have become decentered or rather pluri-centered. The collapse of a metanarratives does not mean they disappear but that they function differently. All the great metanarratives still exist but now they are typically found side by side in every great city. They do not provide a center for the life of the culture as a whole but for individuals and their subcultures. Consequently the public order of postmodern cities has no single sacred temple at their center, spinning a grand all-encompassing narrative which holds all things together. Rather, like Disneyworld and Epcot, different historical and cultural worlds exist side by side in postmodern cities without an integrating center. They are held together instead by technological networks operating behind the scenes. Ultra-postmodern cities like Las Vegas reveal most obviously the underlying reality of all great cities in a global civilization. The city has become eclectic and normless.

Nietzsche, in his vivid parable in *The Gay Science* (1882), tells of a madman entering the city square to announce the "death of God," suggesting that this is like the earth being cut loose from its sun: "Whither are we moving now,? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? (*The Gay Science*, 1882 in *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp 95-96, ed. Walter Kaufman, Viking Press, 1954 & 1968) Expressing the sense of a loss of center that came with the emerging global consciousness of the 19th century, nurtured by the invention of the social sciences, especially critical historiography and cross-cultural ethnography (anthropology), all metanarratives seem to him to have collapsed. Each culture had believed its metanarrative described the normative sacred order of the universe. Now, laid out side by side by the techniques of socio-historical consciousness, their very diversity showed each to be a relative human construct. The social sciences did not just report the death of God, they provided the knife with which God was murdered. In such an apocalyptic world, Nietzsche argued, norms would have to be replaced by the will to power and the transvaluation of all values.

Nietzsche said his madman/prophet came too soon but the reality he described was on its way. By 1965 that reality became manifest when the first human beings walked in space and for the first time viewed for themselves the truth of the world as a globe -- sending back images from space for all the earth to share. Cut loose from the earth these astronauts experienced Nietzsche's vertigo. Free floating in space, tethered only to their spacecraft, which way was up? Which way was down? The integral links between technique, globalization and apocalypse are summed up in this image. The movement from the Book of Revelation's description of the order of the cosmos collapsing as the sky disappears "like a scroll rolling up" (Rev 6: 12-14) to the loss of horizon by the early spacewalkers breaking free of the earth's gravity and the postmodern sense of loss a center in our great cities around the world sums up the history of civilization in a nut shell.

Ellul's Post-Christian Ethics -- Deconstructing the Sacred

Ellul's work can be understood as an exercise in postmodern, post-Christian theology. *As Lyotard explained, postmodern does not express an historical period so much as a style of thinking.* If post-modern represents a decentered style of thought, post-Christian, represents a decentered style of thinking about the role of Christianity in society. Its role is not to dominate from the center, creating a "Holy Roman Empire" but to subvert throughout the diaspora and transform from within through decentering strategies. Globalization tends to make decentered thinking a dominant trait of our time, nevertheless such

thinking can be found here and there throughout history and is at least as ancient as the story of Babel. Indeed, biblical thought tends to be decentered from the very beginning of the Torah, in the book of Genesis, which offers us two alternative stories of creation. This decentering is repeated when Christianity offers us four competing gospels. Perhaps Origen was right when he said that it was the Holy Spirit that put contradictions in the stories of the Bible in order to force us beyond the most superficial literal meaning of the Bible to grasp the deepest level of spiritual meaning.

Tension, contradiction, deconstruction -- these are the fruits of the Christian way of life. In the second century Tatian constructed the Diatessaron, the first attempt to harmonize the four gospels into one story. This attempt was rejected by the early church, preferring tension to synthesis. As in the Christian Gospels so in the Christian life, for Ellul the point is not to resolve the tensions but introduce tension and maladjustment as a limit on the totalism of the technicist way of life. Ellul's style of thinking is decentered through and through. His work as a sociologist and as a theologian seemed at first to be the product of dual personalities unrelated to each other. But gradually the two separate authorships were revealed to be part of a larger strategy not of synthesis but of deliberate tension and contradiction. Ellul describes his total critique of technological civilization as a "science of the city" that occurs at the disjunctive juncture of his sociology and his theology. Like Kierkegaard, his authorship offers a thesis and an antithesis but no synthesis. His "science of the city" interfaces a sociology of the sacred with a theology of the holy.

The key distinctions of this science -- the sacred, the secular and the holy -- were developed between 1946 and 1954. They evolved from the *Theological Foundation of Law* (1946) through *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948) to the linking of the sacred and the demonic in *Man and Money* (1953 - dates for the original French editions). But it is only two decades later, in his 1973 book *The New Demons (Les Nouveaux Possedes)*, that he maps out the terrain of the sacred and the holy in a way that decisively illuminates his strategy of juxtaposing the sacral necessities of technology with the desacralizing or sanctifying power of the scriptural Word of God theologically explicated. I consider *The New Demons* the Rosetta Stone of Ellul's authorship -- for the first time bringing sociology and theology together in one book. Yet his purpose is not synthesis but the creating of a tension between the two by adding a "Coda for Christians" to his sociological analysis of the religiosity of the technological society.

All of this prepares the way for his crowning theological work, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation (L'Apocalypse:architecture en mouvement, 1976)* where he tells us that the Greek word for judgment, *krisis*, means "to separate" which is the act by which God creates -- separating light from darkness, the heavens from earth, land from water, etc. Separation decenters and deconstructs our worlds, the way God's judgment of Babel decentered and deconstructed the totalism of Babel's one language and singular technological project. The *New Demons* and *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* show that Ellul's apocalyptic thought grasped the task of postmodern "deconstruction" in a unique brand of religious postmodernism.

In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), Giovanna Borradori published interviews with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, followed by her own commentary on each. Borradori summarizes Derrida's deconstructive project as involving four steps: (1) identify the dualisms operative in the text and in society (the one leads to the other), (2) identify the hierarchy of the dualisms in the text and in society, (3) invert or subvert the dualistic hierarchies by showing what would happen if the negative and positive sides of each dualism were reversed as a way of exposing the ideology of the

will to power involved in the dualistic classifications, and finally (4) produce a third term “which complicates the original load-bearing structure beyond recognition” and so deforms and reforms it into a new liberating configuration. This is an apt description of Ellul's science of the city as well. Steps one and two are what Ellul accomplishes when he analyzes the sacralization of technique sociologically, dividing the world into sacred and profane. Steps three and four are accomplished when he responds theologically and ethically and transgresses, and so sanctifies and secularizes the sacred in the name of the holy, introducing apocalyptic hope and the possibility of freedom and justice into the technicist society.

Justice is not a word that immediately comes to mind when I think of postmodernism. For years I dismissed deconstruction as irresponsible relativism. In the hands of many of its practitioners it probably is. But I changed my mind on this with respect to Derrida after I began reading some of his later work which is deeply indebted to Immanuel Levinas. Derrida's later work is dominated by the themes of grace (the gift), hospitality, the messianic – and also the surprising insistence that justice is the one thing that cannot be deconstructed (*Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, (Routledge, 1992), Chp. 1). The law, he said, can be deconstructed but only in the name of the demand for justice. In fact Derrida insists that justice is the driving force of deconstruction – they are, he argues, one and the same. For Derrida, justice, like Ellul's apocalypse of the holy, comes from the outside, as a gift – a gift that subverts all dualisms and makes new beginnings possible. Ellul is a religious postmodernist. His religious postmodernism is able to deconstruct the endless dialectic of absolutism and relativism (the totalist temptations that feed each other in a technicist civilization) that plagues secular postmodernism and so exorcise the “new demons” of the postmodern world. (See my book, *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (SUNY, 1993) which argues that this dialectic of absolutism and relativism is the underlying dialectic generating the Janus faced bipolar sacral myth of apocalypse/utopia that feeds our embrace of technical necessities. See also, *Religion and Globalization*, Oxford University Press, 2008 -- coauthored with John Esposito and Todd Lewis)

For Ellul, the sacred makes a virtue out of necessity in which our utopian hopes deliver us into some literal apocalyptic self-destructive destiny. Today, technique replaces nature as that new realm of necessity that surrounds and overwhelms us and on which we depend for our very existence. It takes the place of nature as the realm of the sacred -- the object of our fascination and dread. So a technical society creates a morality that both requires our obedience (always choosing the most efficient solution) and helps us adjust to those requirements by fostering the political illusion of being in control, even as psychological techniques are used to enable us to be "well adjusted" to our society's requirements. The sacred promotes a morality of efficiency under the guise of a rational ethical system which demands our obedience in order to fulfill our wildest hopes and dreams for utopia.

Given the totalism of technicism in an age of globalization, we might wonder whether a Christian can (or even should) cooperate with others, religious and non-religious, in creating a global ethic? Ellul's understanding of Christian ethics opens up a clear path for such trans-cultural and even interreligious cooperation. Decentering goes to the heart of Ellul's view of Christian ethics. Ellul argues that ethics must never become a rational system to which we conform. Ethics does not require unquestioning obedience but the questioning of unquestioning obedience. For Ellul, there is no such thing as a Christian ethic. Christians, like other human beings on the face of the earth, do have a pragmatic need to create an ethic, but such an ethic is always provisional human invention. Christians have used many such human

inventions, borrowing from Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc. But the Christian life is rooted not in some rational system of calculation but in the spontaneous inventiveness of life in Christ, who works in us to will and to do (Philippians 2:13) That inventiveness is the result of the Spirit that blows where it will, so that when we act, it is "I, yet not I, but Christ in me" who acts (Galatians 2:20). Ellul would agree with Augustine -- love and do what you will -- and also Aquinas, who describes Christian virtue as God working in us without us. The good to be done is God's will as given to me in the moment, in the situation I am confronted with that forces me to invent a response.

Nechama Tec, a sociologist, in her book, *When Light Pierced the Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 1986) studied those who rescued Jews in Poland during the Holocaust. She gives us good insight into ethics as *invention in the moment*. She tried to find the common denominator among all the rescuers. Did they share a common economic status; perhaps a common educational background, or maybe they were all devout church-goers? As it turned out it was none of these things. In fact going to church was more likely to make one anti-Semitic, since "the Jews" were often portrayed as the "bad guys" in the Gospel stories and the sermons based on them. It turned out the one thing she could find that rescuers held in common was a sense of "alienation" -- of being a stranger among one's own. This was hard to isolate because for one person this alienation might be due to having a physical disability which made one feel different than others. For another it might be growing up feeling as if one were the least favored child in the family. And yet another might say he or she grew up feeling less adept at sports than their peers. -- and so on.

What is common to all these experiences is "alienation" -- the experience of not fitting in and so being an outsider or stranger. Consequently, when strangers showed up at their door looking for rescue these rescuers spontaneously identified with them and took them in without agonizing over the decision. Samuel and Pearl Oliner, in their book, *The Atruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (Free Press, Macmillan, 1988) conducted some 700 interviews trying to understand holocaust rescuers in comparison to their non-rescuing peers. They noted that 90% of the rescuers rescued one or more complete strangers, 76% said their motive was empathy or compassion, often described as an inner compulsion. They note that 70% acted within minutes of being asked for help, and 80% consulted no one.

The rescuers actions reflected the fundamental truth of biblical ethical insight -- remember welcome the stranger and love the stranger for "you know how the stranger feels" for you too were once strangers -- in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9, Deuteronomy 10:19). This call to remember what it is like to be a stranger illuminates the ethical insight essential for the invention of a global ethic.

In the biblical tradition, the most frequent commandment is to welcome the stranger, for by doing so one welcomes God, or God's messiah, or a messenger (angel) of God without knowing it (Genesis 18:1-5; Matt 25:35; Hebrews 13:2). The core of the command "to remember" creates an *empathic analogy*. In different ways we all experience being a stranger at some time in our life (often many times) and so we know what it is like to be a stranger. Jesus' restatement of the Pharisaic teaching, that we ought to do unto others as we would have them do to us, is grounded in this narrative tradition.

The call to remember that we were once strangers is a call that decenters us and our "religion" so that we can grasp the truth of the story of Babel. We do not find God at the center of our society in some sacred temple we have built to celebrate the idolatry of our own identity. That idolatry is built on the presupposition that all of us who share the same language and world view think we can annex God to

bless the worship of our own self-image. Given the centrality of the biblical command to welcome the stranger (repeated more often than any other command in the Torah), the moral of the story of Babel is that we find God not through uniformity of thought, belief and technique but through our encounter with the stranger. God confuses the language of the citizens of Babel not to punish them but to redirect their quest. You find God not by building a tower to heaven but by turning to the stranger who does not speak your language and is not like you. God is not found in sameness but in difference. As Isaiah suggests, God is the ultimate stranger whose thoughts are not our thoughts and ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

If we follow Ellul's sociological analysis, in a sacred society one expects to find God at the center, in the sacred temple that reinforces ethnocentric identity. In such a society, all who are the same are sacred and human, all others who are different are profane and less than human. Since we have moral obligations only to other human beings, the stranger can be excluded and dehumanized. But the biblical tradition of the holy is anti-ethnocentric. It decenters our expectations and insists that God cannot be found at the center of our society, or even at the center of our religion, but only outside of it -- in the stranger, the one who is not like us. That is the message of the story of Babel that is reinforced at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends upon the nascent church. When strangers from all over the Roman empire gather, each speaks his or her own language and yet each is understood by all (Acts 2:1-13). The Holy Spirit does not require that we all be the same but reveals God in difference and invites us to invent whatever action will honor that reality.

Hospitality is the direct embodiment of the holy. *Hospitality is the north star of global ethics. Any two or more religious and/or cultural traditions that emphasize hospitality to the stranger are able to work together synergistically to sanctify society, that is subvert and secularize the sacred order that would divide us.* By recognizing the humanity of the one who does not share our identity as the one who brings God into our lives, hospitality decenters us. Speaking as a Christian, we only bring Christ to the stranger when we go out seeking to meet Christ in the stranger. Whenever we welcome the stranger, we welcome God or God's messiah and God is all in all. (See my book on hospitality and universal salvation, *No One Left Behind: Is Universal Salvation Biblical?* (Authors Choice, 2011), an updated version of *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race* (Trinity International Press, 1996). While the sacred sacralizes society and divides the world into the sacred and profane, the holy desacralizes or secularizes and so sanctifies society, rendering it secular and open to the diversity of the whole human race (1 Timothy 4:10). But contrary to Max Weber, secularization is not a permanent accomplishment. The world can remain secular only through the constant iconoclasm of the holy. Without that constant subversion of the sacred by the holy, the secular itself becomes a new sacred order -- that is the main argument of Ellul's *The New Demons*.

When I wrote my dissertation on Ellul under Gabriel Vahanian's direction in 1978, I sought to do what Schleiermacher said was the task of the exegete -- to understand the author better than he understands himself. I argued that Ellul advocated the rehabilitation of the sacred with respect to "revolution" but seemed inconsistent in regarding "utopianism" as beyond the pale of such rehabilitation. With the aid of Karl Mannheim's book *Ideology and Utopia* (1936; Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.) I showed that apocalyptic thought can and often has been utopian, and that in fact Ellul's exegesis of the apocalyptic tradition and the ethics of apocalyptic hope can be interpreted, on his own premises, as leading to a

rehabilitation of utopianism. For Ellul, the *Book of Revelation* is a mirror for understanding and acting in the world here and now. It is not about changing worlds but about changing the world.

When I sent Ellul my book, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (1981, Mellon Press --a revised version of my 500 page 1978 dissertation), Ellul wrote me to say "you are quite right on the subject of Apocalypse and Utopia." Moreover, he added that he was objecting to the popular use of the word "utopia" by "modern intellectuals" while, by contrast, he found Vahanian's use of "utopia/technique to be "very convincing" (personal letter to me, May 2, 1982) In Ellul's book, *The Humiliation of the Word* (1985; translation of *La parole humiliee*, 1981) we see evidence of this when he speaks for the first time about a positive meaning for the term "utopia." There Ellul argues that: "projects, utopias, intentions and doctrines -- all these belong to the order of truth, and are known and created by the word (p. 230)." Given his past merciless critique of "utopianism" this was a startling statement.

As with his rehabilitation of "revolution" it seems one can say of "utopia" also, that "whoever receives the revelation of God should give heed to men's hope, not in order to tell them that they are deluded . . . but to help them give birth to their hope" (*To Will and To Do*, p.81). As Ellul argues in *The Ethics of Freedom* (French two volume edition, 1973 & 1975, English translation 1976), Christian ethics does this in three ways that lead to global ethics: 1) dialogue and encounter, (2) realism and transgression, and (3) risk and contradiction. The first is not about getting together for some academic discussion of our similarities and differences (whether religious or political) but discovering these by joining together with all other human beings who are struggling to create a better world. Christians, oriented by an apocalyptic hope, do not place their hope in "this world" of politics and technique and so can work with others to transgress the sacred awe that conforms us to "this world." Such transgression opens the technicist society to its utopian possibilities. So Christians can and should work together with others of diverse religious and political views to invent those actions which will enable all to contradict the present order, not so much to overturn it as to transform it, so that freedom and justice are possible within it. In my view, these are exactly the tactics created by Gandhi and embraced by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights Vietnam era that gave birth to one of the first movements in global ethics.

Ellul's apocalyptic critique turns out to be both deconstructive in Derrida's sense and utopian in Gabriel Vahanian's sense. And as such, it opens the door to the participation of Christians in the invention of a global ethic that might assist in helping human beings of all religions and cultures give birth to their utopian hopes.

Global Ethics as Subversion of the Sacred: From Ellul to Gandhi and King

In the age of Enlightenment, Kant adopted the Stoic strategy and sought to transcend the "irrational diversity" of the world's religions by appeal to the universality of reason. In the view of many, that experiment appears to impose a Western rationalistic totalism on the globe. An alternate strategy was explored in Chicago in 1993 when the one hundredth anniversary of the *Parliament of The Worlds Religion* was celebrated by holding a second parliament. The holding of these two Parliaments is itself an expression of the solidifying global consciousness of humanity in all its religious diversity. Unlike the first Parliament, which focused on sharing ideas, the second sought to formulate a "global ethic" that all religions could agree to. The second Parliament sought to emulate the United Nations declaration of Human Rights created in

1948 in response to the atrocities of World War II, symbolized by the mass death produced at Auschwitz and Hiroshima. The U.N. did not explicitly base its declaration of rights on religious beliefs and practices. The Parliament, however, sought to do just that and, in the process, balance human rights with human responsibilities in a world of global interdependence.

Neither Kant's attempt nor the Parliament's attempt is entirely satisfactory. The first ends up imposing a new totalism and the second reduces ethics to whatever consensus we can agree on. Morality can be defined by consensus, ethics cannot. In Nazi Germany people agreed that killing Jews is good. However, something cannot be considered ethically good just because we agree that it is. Ellul would agree with Socrates, ethics is the questioning of what we commonly agree is good (the sacred), asking as Socrates did: Is what people say is good really good?

Ellul's understanding of ethics is faithful not only to the biblical tradition of the holy but also to the spirit of Socrates, for whom ethics is also a human response to the experience of the holy. To the degree that we can separate Socratic thought from the thought of Plato, it is clear that Socrates does not offer us an ethical theory but lives the ethical life by responding to his *daimon* -- a guiding spirit sent by "the god" who never tells him what to do but only warns him when he is plunging off in the wrong direction. Otherwise Socrates is left to his own discretion to invent a way of life centered in the wisdom that comes from questioning all things. Socrates tells us that it is his *daimon* that compels him to question and sends him as a gadfly to Athens, asking the troubling question -- is what we say is good, really good? Socrates describes this as his religious vocation and it is one that gets him arrested, tried and executed for (1.) impiety toward the gods who render the Athenian way of life sacred and (2.) corrupting the youth by teaching them to question the sacred authority of that way of life. Socrates is accused of being an atheist but says that cannot be since he is being compelled to question by a God other than the gods who sacralize the Athenian way of life. He comes, he suggests, not to destroy the Athenian way of life but to elevate it to meet the demands of justice. To put it in Ellul's terms, Socrates comes "to rehabilitate the sacred in the name of the holy" -- where the holy is construed as the Unseen Measure (the infinite) by which our humanity is measured.

In a similar fashion Ellul says he questions the sacred way of life of technological society, not in order to destroy this society but secularize it and so rehabilitate the sacred in order to meet the demands of the holy. So he insists, the Christian serves alongside of others seeking a revolutionary transformation of the technical society not in order to tell them they are deluded but in order to desacralize and so sanctify the city, so as to help others realize their utopian dreams. Ellul's post-Christian or decentered approach to ethics opens a path from Christian ethics to a global ethics of dialogue, transgression and contradiction.

It is desirable for religious communities around the world to identify shared understandings of what constitutes a "good life" across religions and cultures and promote that vision globally. But given Ellul's distinction between the sacred and the holy, we would not call whatever consensus we reached a "global ethic" but rather a "global morality." By contrast, a global ethic would be a critique of all global morality -- asking the Socratic question that challenges all consensus: Is what we claim is good, really good? Ethics in the Socratic sense, rehabilitates morality by questioning it by the measure of an Unseen Measure. Or in the biblical sense, questioning our morality by understanding ourselves as created in the image of a God without image. For the sacred by definition defines some as profane and less than human because "they are not like us." But the holy, as Gabriel Vahanian would say, is "iconoclastic," -- being created in the image of a God

without image we are all equal. No one can claim to "look more like God" than another" whether because of race, religion or nationality, etc. God is not the answer to all our questions but the question to all our answers. Our answers are always finite while our questions are infinite -- there is always one more question to force us to maintain our integrity and follow the questions wherever they lead, and so remain open to the infinite and further eschatological transformation.

Ellul argued that those who read his theology should not turn it into dogma but rather build on his analysis, or even challenge it, by thinking for themselves and inventing their own response to our common circumstances. In that spirit, my proposal is that a global ethic can emerge whenever and wherever two or more traditions emphasize narratives of hospitality to the stranger. For to welcome the stranger is precisely to recognize the humanity of the one who is not like me and does not share my story and identity. In the sphere of religion, Mohandas K. Gandhi appears to have led the first such global religious ethical movement and that movement had a decidedly postmodern orientation. Gandhi tapped the advances in technology that created first global media (radio, telephone, telegraph, film and the international press) to garner international support for his campaign against British colonialism as a form of Western domination. At the same time, he also used the media to promote global interdependence and interreligious harmony. Gandhi thought globally and acted locally, and his movement (both in South Africa and later in India) attracted followers from diverse religions and cultures, showing that religious action can be decentered or multicentered and still promote human dignity.

Most importantly, Gandhi's own ethic of non-violent civil disobedience was forged through an international dialogue (as we have suggested) with the likes of Tolstoy and Jesus' teachings of the sermon on the Mount, even as Martin Luther King, Jr. developed his ethic through an international dialogue with Gandhi and the Gita. Gandhi and King exemplify the strategy of dialogue, transgression and contradiction. The strategy of civil disobedience was built on inter-religious global dialogue and sought to insert tension into a sacred society in order to transgress and contradict its order and so rehabilitate its sacred order to reflect the holy, replacing divisions of sacred and profane with the oneness of humanity. (See my *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics* (Wiley/Blackwell, 2011 -- co-authored with two of my former students, Dell deChant and David Lantigua).

In response to the reach of Western colonialism around the world, a global ethic began to take shape with Gandhi's challenge to the British empire's hold on India.. Then, in the next generation the Gandhian model spread. This occurred during the Civil Rights-Vietnam era in America. with the forging of a common ethic among the spiritual children of Gandhi -- Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh and, in his own way, even Malcolm X. This generation, following Gandhi, showed that a global ethic does not have to erase diversity. Rather through passing over and coming back, this diversity can create a synergy in which a common ethical coalition can form to transform the world without its members having to sacrifice their distinctive narratives and traditions. Each speaks his own language yet each is understood by all, finding in each other's lives models of ethical inventiveness.

My understanding of global ethics is embodied in the process that John Dunne in *The Way of All the Earth* (1971) calls "passing over" to another's religion and culture and "coming back" to one's own, finding and sharing wisdom through a global dialogue among those struggling for social justice. That dialogue is not one of those embarrassing, overly self-conscious, abstract academic discussions about how we are different or similar. It is rather the unselfconscious sharing of insight (from our diverse traditions) while engaged in the

common struggle to transform the world. It is a struggle that leads persons like Martin Luther King, Jr., (a black Baptist preacher) Abraham Joshua Heschel (a Hasidic Rabbi) and Thich Nhat Hanh (a Buddhist monk) to form ethical coalitions in the 1950s and 1960s for subversive actions that will desacralize and sanctify society.

For Gandhi, ethics is not about obedience to rules but disobedience -- a civil disobedience that subverts all rules in order to protect the freedom and hopes of every individual around the world. As I have noted, Ellul argued, that it is not the job of Christians to tell others that they are deluded in their hopes for a better world but to work alongside all persons, whatever their religious or philosophical commitments, to help them realize their hopes. A Christian, on this understanding, is committed to dialogue with all persons and the subversion of all totalisms that imprison and dehumanize human beings everywhere. And Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh embody Ellul's model of the holy as the experience that calls into question and desacralizes all totalisms by desacralizing and subverting their sacred orders through civil disobedience.

In the case of Gandhi, having gone to England to study law as a young man, he was introduced to the writing of Leo Tolstoy and Tolstoy's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. The message of nonviolence—love your enemy, turn the other cheek—took hold of Gandhi. And yet he did not become a Christian. Rather, he returned to his parents' religion and culture, finding parallels to Jesus' teachings in the Hindu tradition. And so Gandhi read Hindu scriptures with new insight, interpreting the *Bhagavad Gita* allegorically (citing Paul's saying, the letter killeth but the spirit gives life) as a call to resist evil by nonviolent means. And just as Gandhi was inspired by Tolstoy as he led the fight for the dignity of the lower castes and outcasts within Hindu society and for the liberation of India from British colonial rule, so Martin Luther King, Jr., would later use the ideas of Gandhi in the nonviolent struggle for the dignity of black citizens in North America.

Gandhi never became a Christian and King never became a Hindu. Nevertheless, Gandhi's Hindu faith was profoundly transformed by his encounter with the Christianity of Tolstoy, just as King's Christian faith was profoundly transformed by his encounter with Gandhi's Hinduism. What they shared was the invention of a secular ethic in response to their experiences of the holy. In the lives of these twentieth-century religious social activists we have examples of "passing over" as a transformative postmodern spiritual adventure.

Whereas in the secular forms of postmodernism all knowledge is relative, and therefore the choice between interpretations of any claim to truth is "undecidable," Gandhi and King opened up an alternate path. While in matters of religion, truth may be undecidable, they showed that acceptance of diversity does not have to lead to the kind of ethical relativism that so deeply troubles fundamentalists. For in the cases of Gandhi and King, passing over led to a sharing of wisdom among traditions that gave birth to an ethical coalition in defense of human dignity across religions and cultures— creating a global ethic. For Gandhi and King, ethical actions arise spontaneously out of their experiences of the holy. For each, such experiences desacralize the divisions of sacred and profane produced by the sacralization of society. Civil disobedience contradicts these divisions and so sanctifies society rendering it secular and so hospitable to all strangers.

The spiritual adventure initiated by Gandhi and King involves passing over (through imagination, through travel and cultural exchange, and especially through a common commitment to social action to promote

social justice) into the life and stories and traditions of others, sharing in them and, in the process, coming to see one's own tradition through them. Such encounters are a form of hospitality that enlarges our sense of human identity by embracing the stranger. The religious metanarratives of the world's civilizations may have become "smaller narratives" in an age of global diversity, but they have not lost their power. Indeed, in this Gandhian model, it is the sharing of the wisdom from another tradition's metanarratives that gives the stories of a person's own tradition a new synergistic power. Each person remains on familiar religious and cultural ground, yet each is profoundly influenced by the other to insert an element of tension into society in the name of justice for the stranger.

By their lives, Gandhi and King demonstrated that, contrary to the fears raised by fundamentalists, the sharing of a common ethic and of spiritual wisdom across traditions does not require any practitioners to abandon their religious identity even as it subverts the fears of "secularists" that religion must always lead to a new inquisition - an new totalism. Instead, Gandhi and King offered a model of unity in diversity.

One of the ways Ellul's work furthers this global synergy is by arguing for a Christian understanding of salvation as universal. Ellul's vision of universal salvation operates to subvert the Christian impulse to turn global ethics into a new totalism. The Christian temptation to totalism plagues Christian history from Constantine to the Inquisition and the global missionizing of the colonial period. This temptation has consistently derived its power from the ideology of evangelism as the task of saving all of humanity by converting all to share the Christian worldview. That ideology is a form of the totalistic ideology of Babel before its fall into the diversity of language and worldview, a totalistic ideology that Christians have repeatedly fallen back into throughout history. But Jesus' command was for Christians to be the salt of the earth, not to turn the whole earth into salt. Evangelism is not about making the whole world Christian but spreading the Good News of God's hospitality to the whole human race, not just "believers" (I Timothy 4:10 -- See my book, *No One Left Behind: Is Universal Salvation Biblical? 2011*, or its earlier version *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race, 1996*.)

Both Gandhi and King, like Ellul, rejected the privatization of religion, insisting that religion in all its diversity plays a decisive role in shaping the public order of society. And like Ellul, both were convinced that only a firm commitment to nonviolence on the part of religious communities would enable this without society returning to the kind of religious wars that accompanied the Protestant Reformation and the emergence of modernity. Following Ellul's perspective, I would argue that a global ethic would be human invention created in response to the experience of the holy to help us keep our world open to further eschatological development, an apocalyptic anticipation of a new creation in which all peoples of the earth gather into a city without a sacred temple at its center, a postmodern city where all strangers are welcome and so God is all in all.

In *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, Ellul can be read as suggesting that God's true intention for the human city is revealed. The narrative of Revelation deconstructs the sacral imagination of the cities of the earth, summed up in the city of Babylon, by describing the destruction of these cities centered on their sacred temples and sacred ways of life. But before they are destroyed all their citizens exit these cities and "stand at a safe distance." (Revelation, Chp. 18, especially vs. 9, 11, 15, 17). Then the demons of the religious imagination that sacralize each city (and seduce the citizens of each to attempt to totalize their way of life in conflict with every other) are then consigned to the lake of fire.

In *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, Ellul describes the New Jerusalem as the reverse image of the fallen global city. For while the cities of the earth seek to totalize their respective sacred ways of life by the will to power, in the New Jerusalem, which has no temple at its center, all the tribes of the earth in all their diversity are gathered in and God is all in all. On Ellul's reading, Apocalypse is not about changing worlds but about changing the world. *The Book of Revelation* is an iconoclastic mirror for the world in this present moment. Even the contemporary postmodern global technicist city, once desacralized, becomes open to its truly utopian destiny as the City of God, in which (to paraphrase the story of Pentecost) each speaks his or her own language and yet each is understood by all.

Silences: Jacques Ellul's Lost Book

by Yannick Imbert

Abstract: In this article, I shall attempt to show how Ellul tried to go beyond the dialectical tension between his sociological and theological works. This thesis, however surprising as it may sound to many Ellulian readers, is supported by the power and importance of poetry for Ellul. To do so, this article will draw some insights from Ellul's poetical work *Silences*. We will consider a few brief examples of how Ellul integrated in a single creative movement two aspects of his works he always claimed to be separate. In this way, poetry demonstrates who Ellul really was: *un homme entier* (a complete and consistent human being)

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Introduction

Ellul often maintained that his works were to be seen as dialectically connected, each sociological work being intimately connected to, and answering to, a theological one. This procedure has led some to believe that Ellul's works could be thought of apart from one another, especially that one area could be thought of apart from the other. Ellul himself gave this impression when making his theological statements and convictions sound like merely personal convictions.[1] In doing so, he allows for the disconnection of his sociology and theology.[2] This, in part, is the result of his almost radically consistent dialectics. However, this brief study wants to challenge this assumption in looking at Ellul's poetry.[3]

This article aims to do so through the study of a book that, to the best of the author's knowledge, has never been studied before, namely, *Silences*, one of the two volumes of Ellul's poetry. *Silences* has been chosen rather than *Oratorio*, the second volume of Ellul's collected poetry, the latter being a poetical commentary of the book of Revelation, as Lynch indicated: "These poems, divided into five chapters, form a unified whole narrating Ellul's vision of the Apocalypse." [4] However, this article will focus on *Silences*, since the main thesis of this study is that all the works of Jacques Ellul are integrated in *Silences*, making this work a holistic presentation of his sociological and theological studies. In fact, *Silences* is a more integrative collection of poetry than *Oratorio*, and has a "wholeness" that more clearly takes its inspiration from all of Ellul's works.[5]

Ellul and poetry: Hidden secret of *un homme entier*

Poetry was always for Ellul an eminently mystical experience as well as, and far more profoundly, a way of discovering meaning and expressing deeper experiences of the world.[6] As he commented: “Poetry is the art form which pleases me the most and in which I find deep meaning.”[7] The meaning conveyed in poetry is therefore first and foremost a personal one expressed in symbols, and even emotions, making discovery of meaning difficult for those who are not writers of poetry. It is almost as if poetry is written by the writer and for the writer’s sake. In fact for Ellul, it is through poetical language that one discovers and explores one’s status as *subject*. In his *Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul explains that through “poetical naming,” one truly becomes a subject:

A poet is lying when he throws off language: “I said ‘Apple’ to the apple, and it answered me ‘Liar.’ And ‘Vulture’ to the vulture, who did not respond.” Human sovereignty is due more to our language than to our technique and instruments of war. One can claim or believe oneself to be free because of language. Naming something means asserting oneself as subject and designating the other as object. It is the greatest spiritual and personal venture.[8]

Indeed, the “word” was for Ellul one of the most distinctive abilities of human nature, since poetical language conveys one’s deepest identity revealed through images and metaphors. Poetry itself makes, more than any other human activity or ability, a person “subject,” or even really human. In fact, Ellul commented that the true power of poetry was to present the human mind with the necessary ambiguity that makes up our daily world. Poetry is a gift enabling us to see the world without giving away its beauty and ambiguity. No caricature, no simplifying: just poetry. Ellul writes:

The poetic contains paradox within it. You believe poetic language to be insignificant, a side issue in comparison with political and scientific talk? You are right, but poetry continually brings the uncertainty of ambiguity to our attention, along with double meanings, manifold interpretations false bottoms, and multiple facets.[9]

Thus, at the very outset of this article, we must recognize that poetry is for Ellul a holistic endeavor, one that cannot be dialectically considered, or better, poetry is the literary manifestation of dialectics. This would further entail that only in poetry is dialectical thought dissolved. Let us, by way of example, turn to poem 10 in which death is the obvious thematic center of the ten verses:[10]

Ô rigueur de la mort qui déjà nous sous-tend
arcature profonde où repose la vie
et secrète illumine, inflexive distend
le geste le plus simple et l'offrande accomplie.
Je connais mon destin mais ne l'accepte pas
s'il me reste plus dans la paralysie
que l'oeil encor ouvert pour voir venir la mort
là reste cependant la valeur de ma vie

Je vis pour te nier mais je ne te rencontre
et ne perçois que l'acte et la main superflus

What first strikes the reader is how death is described in the first two verses of this poem. The first characteristic is the rigor of death, through and in which no incertitude or possibility for anything else is left. Death is the beginning and end of all: it encloses man in a “system” from which there is no escape. Death is a necessity, clearly expressed in the second part of verse 1, “O rigueur de la mort qui déjà nous sous-tend.” Here death is symbolically compared to something that supports the life of man; death is the foundation of life, the *only* thing which remains when the life of man has ended. Ellul thus affirms that neither technology, nor politics, nor economy can sustain man's life. Death is the core of life—without death there is no life, and life takes its meaning from the immediacy of death.[11] With this statement about death's ultimate reality over human life, Ellul summarizes both his sociological observation and his theological conviction.

We also notice two contrasts in verse 3. First, death, secretive, nonetheless illuminates every action (*geste*) and every human active meaning (*offrande*). All of man's actions, even the simplest ones, and even human secular rituals (*offrande*), are included in death's double contrast. Every action is thus both veiled and revealed by the ultimate nature of death. To begin with, death is in a way secret, for it is hidden in every action, every second. In every moment of human life, death waits for its revelation. In this sense, Ellul's presentation of “secret death” is reminiscent of the futile, ephemeral, and provisory nature of human actions. This triple reference to human actions is closely paralleled to his view of, among other things, political actions. When every human action is futile and ephemeral, only death remains.

In that, death also serves as *revelation* (illumine) of itself and of human deeds: indeed, death, at the last moment, reveals its secret, that there is nothing in human life which death cannot dissolve. Further, every human action takes its meaning when compared to death. In affirming this ultimacy of death, Ellul is most likely offering a radical negation of the myth of human progress:

Thus, according to Qohelet, the human race does not progress. . . . We remain trapped in our condition, by our time and space. People today are no more intelligent than five thousand years ago. Nor are they more just, or superior in any other way.[12]

It is not technologies, political systems nor any other human action, that can reveal the ultimate result of human action, but only death.

In poem 50, a poem dedicated to another major socio-theological theme in Ellul, the city, the same importance of the term “secret” is stressed.[13] Verses 1 and 12 are opposed in their common use of “secret.”[14] However, if both verses use the same word, their meaning is quite different. In verse 1, “secret” refers to the city and to the fact that the city itself reveals, albeit unwillingly, its own secrets (“shadows”, end of line 2) through the lights and “eyes” of its own streets (verses 1 and 2). Hence, in the first verse, “secret” is used in a negative sense, because of its relation to the city and to the subsequent estrangement of man (“opprobrium”, line 8). The “secret” is here what makes the situation of man in the city, tragic. In verse 12, by contrast, “secret” refers to the life of man—that is, to what is hidden in man,

and by extension, to what is hidden by God. Man is a stranger in his greatest work,[15] but in the middle of his loneliness, in this very city, salvation will rise again, and the city itself will one day find its redeemed place as the re-creation of the original Eden.[16] There is a grammatical difficulty in finding the relation between verse 1 and verse 2.

The second contrast, in verse 3b of poem 10, begins with the inflexible nature of death, that yet stretches (*distend*) out the meaning of all things.[17] Even though this verse establishes a second contrast, it is also likely that this second one is a parallel, a repetition of the first “illuminated secret” of verse 3a. The contrasts here are meant to stress the ultimacy of death and the order of *necessity*. The direct effect of death, then, is that through it every gesture, every ordinary action, is *illuminated*, and the true meaning and importance of ordinary things is *revealed*. But even more importantly, even the offerings brought to the modern gods are revealed by death as being vain, futile. Death brings all things to the prospect of the end of life. This no doubt has parallels in Ellul’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, *Reason for Being*. [18]

In the second stanza, man comes to the forefront with his doubts and struggles. The tragedy of human life is well expressed in verse 5: “Je connais mon destin mais ne l’accepte pas” (“I know my fate, but do not accept it”). Here Ellul expresses that man, or he himself, knows his destiny, that is, death. But if death is man’s destiny, resignation is no part of what Ellul shows human life to be. There is a deep opposition between what man knows and how he reacts to this *certainty*. Man is almost dead for sure; he is like a man, paralyzed, who can do nothing but see and wait for his fate to fall upon him. His passivity is his only possession.

But even in this paralysis, man does not fall into despair, for to be able to see death *coming* is the real value of man’s life. The point here is difficult to see, but it seems clear first that verse 8 refers to verse 7 and not to verse 9 and 10. The value of life lies then precisely in the fact that man, if he cannot do anything else, can at least see death coming; that is, he can become conscious of the value and the destiny of his life. Here it may be useful to quote what seems for Ellul an important aspect of man’s life, a sentence that Ellul himself quotes at the beginning of his study on Ecclesiastes, after his introduction: “In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in everything that deceives.”[19] Thus the death of everything *human* must be affirmed, if hope is to be kindled.

In this poem, Ellul gives a view of life that integrates freedom in God within the basis of his theology. Everything in human life loses its meaning and importance in the light of death, for death is the herald of vanity, especially that of man’s life lived without God’s freedom. This contrast, the opposition of freedom and necessity, is recurrent in Ellul’s work and is present here again. That verse 5 describes the efforts of man to control his life with the term *destin* (fate) is no coincidence. *Destin* bears in its etymology the very idea of necessity imposed on man by the council of the gods, as it was in ancient Greece or Rome. This Ellul rejects, and he proclaims the freedom of man from the constraints of necessity. He always denied such a mechanical view of the relation between God and man, and rejected some traditional Reformed teaching on predestination, which he took, however wrongly, to be of the same kind of divine imposition and slavery imposed over mankind.

This “necessity,” which man considers his fate, has one consequence, that of freezing every instant, every act and every thought, not lived through God (verse 6). Necessity paralyzes man, whose actions thus have

no meaning and no importance on the course of his life. In verses 9 and 10, Ellul states that man lives to deny God, for man is estranged from God. But, in this very estrangement, the hand of God in the life of man appears, as we can see in the use of the pronoun *te*, second person of the singular, referring without much doubt to the divine other, the “you” of man’s most vital relation, i.e. with God.

God is “act and hand superfluous,” says Ellul here in verse 10, but we should not think that Ellul is saying that God is not important and can easily be ruled out of human life. Rather, we have to consider this as an example of the opposition between freedom and necessity in Ellul’s thought. It is known that one of the main features of Ellul’s thought is dialectic, and one of his favorite themes is freedom. This is expressed throughout his books on the relation between freedom and necessity. Here the key theme of freedom and necessity is to be seen again. If death encloses human life in a circle of necessity, God’s presence is freedom itself. Therefore, the superfluous aspect of the act and the hand of “you” is the act of freedom. It is “superfluous” because there is no necessity. Necessity does not lie in God, in whom and by whom is freedom alone. The act of God is a free act, a divine gift of freedom to man. As Ellul affirmed in *What I Believe*:

We must come back unceasingly to grace. Receiving grace is not a matter of good works or of being justified by one’s words. Once again we recall that Jesus did not come to seek the righteous but sinners. . . . Thus God’s grace has an unparalleled dimension and is universal as the concrete expression of his love.[20]

Conclusion: *Silences*, Jacques Ellul’s “grand narrative”

In closing this brief study, it is necessary to summarize the main point, namely that Ellul’s complete *corpus* is integrated into *Silences* and falls under one main conclusion. By this we mean that Ellul’s main point in *Silences* can be applied to his diagnosis of all previous elements, whether it be technique, propaganda, money, or even his theological writings. This assertion would need to be better supported by quotations from Ellul’s works and by a global analysis of all the poems of *Silences*. However, we can maintain this conclusion because, if we read *Silences* in the complete setting of Ellul’s writing, every aspect is considered in the light of one necessity, that is, death. Human finitude —the vanity of this life and the ultimate event of death— seems to be at the center of *Silences* and encompasses all other aspects of life. In this respect, death is indeed the “great leveler.”

With respect to technique, efficiency and usefulness are considered finally to lead to no end, for what would be the usefulness of a technique that irremediably ends in death? In a way, Poem 57 is an example of such an aim of technique. Of course, technique is not mentioned here, but industrialization is, in verse 2, in which the characteristic of the “people” is to be industrious. Industry is then the only element of human life, the all-inclusive explanation and reason of human life. If we read *Silences* with all the other works of Ellul open next to it, and here particularly *The Technological Society*, we can see that the people described here are concerned by the quest for the progress of their technology, a quest that is inextinguishable and devouring, leading man only to final exhaustion (verse 2). It is primarily, as stated in *The Technological Society*, a quest for usefulness and especially for efficiency.[21] Efficiency is then idealized as a means to produce more “free time,” more “freedom.”

But this so-called quest for freedom by way of efficiency is an illusion, because the quest for efficiency devours time itself. Man does not even have enough time for his quest for efficiency. It is to be noted that this poem contains no reference to death. However, the poem seems to call for a look to the past. We do not think this past would have been idealized by Ellul. Moreover, for him, there is no turning back on the road of history. The past cannot be regained. But this poem calls for meditation on what was at the time when the industrious land was only a solitary wasteland. This is what man has in his soul, “deep in his eyes” (verse 6). This absence of something unknown is nonetheless present in the very heart of man (verse 5). It is the absence of the conscience of what will finally happen to every man, who will return to a place of silence and solitude, when his last breath has left his body.

Poem 49 makes clear that man’s desires for power and glory (verse 1), or youth (verse 5), or wealth (or the absence of wealth, “poverty” in verse 11) are recapitulated in the “deathly secret” of man, death itself. This secret, if we consider *Silences* as a unity, is the necessity of death itself. This poem links the theme of death to the theme of time, “I’ instant.” In a short time, glory will be no more, nor youth, nor wealth, nor riches. All these will vanish because at the end, all is vanity. Here we have a precise reference to Ellul’s commentary on Ecclesiastes, a careful study of which will prove highly beneficial for the interpretation of *Silences*. But the secret of man, if it is the necessity of death, is more than death alone. If man’s ultimate secret were that death is necessary, there would be no hope, and Ellul is certainly not a proponent of such a pessimistic view of life. If death is the “ultimate leveler,” the great materialistic judge, it is because, through it, the effect of the judgment of God is dramatically symbolized and this does not condemn, but has as its only goal salvation and God’s manifestation of love. Of course, this may seem contradictory, but Ellul states in several books that God’s curse and judgment are not made against man but for him, for his salvation and his reconciliation with God’s love. Thus, if death is the most visible end, God’s love makes life with God the real ultimate end of life. We could continue this exploration throughout all Ellul’s themes, such as propaganda and revolution, youth (Poem 49 mentions this also), the word, and ethics.

Death, then, enlightens the reality of existence; it brings the lies of society—illusions of material power, eternal youth, and even political power—under the light of the necessity of death and the freedom of God. Under its light and curse, man can see what he really is—man can decipher his secret, that he is a creature of God and that God loves him. This is a radical subversion of the modern view of death, as the end of all things, but Jacques Ellul is almost a master of such subversions. Death then is the window to God. This is the story of man, the story Ellul had deeply engraved in his soul, and which came to life in his poetry. His *grand “poetical” narrative*, then, is that all of man’s desires and wishes will be judged by the curse of death, only to lead to final reconciliation with God in his love.

I have tried in this article to show how *Silences* can be seen as the “missing book” of Ellul, the one in which Ellul integrates all his work. Of course, this study is only preliminary; it is too brief and has passed over some poems that, due to their theme and their place in *Silences*, are most intriguing. But time and space do not allow for a complete study of *Silences*; they allow only for a preliminary consideration of *Silences* as encompassing all of Ellul’s thought. In that, Ellul reveals that for him, poetry functions as a fusion of sociology and theology, as the disintegration of dialectics in personal experience.

The author is well aware that this conclusion stands at odds with Ellul's claim that his work is *essentially* dialectic. Indeed, Ellul himself explained: "Dialectic is so much a part of my way of thinking and being that I am talking about myself and my studies rather than about an academic mode of exposition or a philosophy outside myself." [22] This would argue for the necessity of dialectics in *Silences* as with any other work by Ellul. However, given Ellul's conviction about the poetic nature of man, and given the nature of poetry itself, this appears difficult. Indeed, *Silences* is neither a sociological nor a theological work. It is broader and deeper than any other part of Ellul's work because it unifies it all. In fact, Didier Schillinger, director of Opales (the publisher of *Silences*), remembers: "[Ellul] told me that it was, for him, the most important part of his work." [23]

We do not, however, pretend to have given the right explanation of Ellul's *Silences*. It is merely an exploration of a land nobody to my knowledge has yet entered. This is, then, a preliminary study in two respects, first because of its brevity, and secondly because further study of Ellul's poetry should be undertaken. In *Silences*, Ellul tells us that the relation between man and God is the place in which the recapitulation and unity of man's wholeness are found, after death has revealed the secret of man's life, his finitude and the value of his life by God's love and freedom. This poetry is also a "silence," an expression of the silence that is before God. For Ellul, the absence of words is a mystery that leads to God: "The Word is a mystery. Silence, the absence of the word, is also a mystery." [24]

Thus the title of his book: the poetry of Ellul is *Silences*, in the plural, because it reveals the mystery of the relations of men with each other, and of man with God. It is "silent poetry," because when confronted with death, man awaits God in faith, for nothing remains as his security—no wealth or power, no vanity of human realization. In *Silences*, we see the mystery of man before God and in the world. The mystery of all-terminating death, and the mystery of God's freedom in bringing all men back to him. This is man's true relationship with the Creator: all of man's works being one under God's freedom.

Endnotes

[1] Ellul explained: "I have thus been led to work in two spheres, the one historical and sociological, the other, theological. This does not represent a dispersing of interest nor does it express a twofold curiosity. It is the fruit of what is essentially rigorous reflection. Each part of my work is of equal importance and each is as free as possible from contamination by the other. As a sociologist, I have to be realistic and scientific, using exact methods, though in this regard I have fought methodological battles and had to contest certain methods. As a theologian, I have to be equally intransigent, presenting an interpretation of revelation which is as strict as possible, and making no concession to the spirit of the age." Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 44. Cf. Also Darrell Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1942), 9.

[2] Throughout his writings, readers become aware of the structural importance of what may be properly called "dialectical hermeneutics," which is the ground for the distinction of sociology and theology. Regarding dialectics, Fasching explains: "This biblical dialectic pronounces both the NO and the YES of God's word over the world. It brings both God's judgment and his grace into a dialectic which finds its fullest expression in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Darrell Fasching, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1942), 7.

[3] There has been not yet been any significant study of Ellul's poetry apart from a partial translation of poems taken from *Oratorio* published in *The Ellul Forum* [James Lynch, "The Poetry of Jacques Ellul: An Essay-Review & Translation", *The Ellul Forum* 22 (January 1999), 11-14].

[4] Lynch, "The Poetry of Jacques Ellul," 11.

[5] *Contra* Lynch, "The Poetry of Jacques Ellul," 12.

[6] Ellul's poetry contains many historical (Chagall, poem 8; Belgian painter James Ensor, poem 47), mythological and literary references, rendering the reading/interpretation rather difficult. At times, the reference is more obscure as with the "rêve de Clarisse" of poem 8. The "dream of Clarisse" is most likely a reference to the *Geste de Doon de Mayence* ou *Geste des barons révoltés*, an Old French romance [Cf. E. M. Wilmot-Buxton, ed., *Stories from Old French Romance* (New York: Stokes, s. d.), 100-119]. At other times the reference is left unclear as with the reference to Medea, the famous mythological figure taken from classical Greek tragedy, but possibly taken from Jean Giraudoux's adaptation of the same play.

[7] Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology and Politics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 49. Some of Ellul's comments are reminiscent of Owen Barfield's study of metaphor in *Poetic Diction* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), a work that had a profound influence on J.R.R. Tolkien.

[8] Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 52.

[9] *Idem.*, 25.

[10] Since Ellul's poems have no titles, we have to refer to their page number.

[11] One might be tempted to argue on the basis of God's sovereignty over human history, thus saying that providence, and not death, is ultimate in human actions. However, for Ellul, there is no such thing as divine direction of human actions: "History is not a product of God's actions. . . . Praying for God's kingdom and will shows that there is no such thing as providence." [Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 155-156] This points to the notion of Christian responsibility and action in Ellul's thought, as well as his conception of morality and moral action. Ellul continues saying: "In other words, death comes according to natural laws, but God lets nothing in his creation die without being there, without being the comfort and strength and hope and support of that which dies. *At issue is the presence of God, not his will.*" Italics ours.

[12] *Reason for Being*, 64.

[13] Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, especially chapter 5

[14] Verse 1: "Secrètes, repliées, lampes, incognitos"

Verse 2: "pendant que se discourt le secret de ma vie."

[15] Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 154.

[16] See Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, chapter 5.iii.

[17] One could even argue that death is a giver of meaning for Ellul, even in the social sphere. In fact, he went as far as to argue that “the greatest good that could happen to society today is an increasing disorder.” Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 195.

[18] Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1990).

[19] Ellul, *Reason for Being*, 46 f.

[20] Ellul, *What I Believe*, 198-199.

[21] Ellul, *Reason for Being*, op. cit.

[22] Ellul, *What I Believe*, 29.

[23] Didier Schillinger, personal correspondence with Yannick Imbert, 16 March 2006.

[24] *The Humiliation of the Word*, end of chapter 2.

Théologie et Technique: Pour une éthique de la non-puissance

by Jacques Ellul

Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014

Review Notes by Carl Mitcham

Professor at Colorado School of Mines, author or editor of many works on Jacques Ellul and on the philosophy of technology

Somewhat unexpectedly Jacques Ellul's *Théologie et Technique: Pour une éthique de la non-puissance* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2014) was featured on a display table at the Librairie Mollat in Bordeaux when I walked in. Ellul at least has some popularity in his home town.

What follows is simply a brief note calling attention to this new publication, posthumously edited and prepared for publication by Ellul's son Yves with the assistance of his wife Danielle and Jean Ellul's wife Sivorn and Ellul scholar Frédéric Rognon. In the preface, Yves Ellul describes the previously unpublished manuscript as "generally dated to the year 1975." Some passages were previously published as articles during Ellul's lifetime. "There remains a 'body' of six chapters unique to this manuscript and a plan for the book as a whole."

At the same time, the book admittedly has a "rough, unfinished character: the intended plan is not fully respected [and] many repetitions, sometimes with small variations in viewpoint, give a clumsy character to the published text" (p. 7). Despite such weaknesses, "this book [is] both stimulating and challenging [and provides some perspective on] the evolution of mentalities over the last forty years, both in sociology and in theology" (p. 8).

Here in summary are the six core chapters (and their lengths) with brief comments:

1. The Challenges of Theological Production in a Technical Society (23 pages)

It is noted that the chapter and section titles here "have been proposed by the [Ellul] family." (The same is true in multiple other instances in the book). The three sections comment on traditional attitudes of theology toward technology (referencing especially the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Emmanuel Mounier); diverse responses to technology with theological implications (such as the Club of Rome and Lewis Mumford); and a reflection on "Technique and

transcendence.”

2. Situating Theological Reflection on Technique (49 pages)

Three sections deal with “humans, nature, and the artificial”; “Technique according to the Bible”; and “the status of theology in the technical society.” The second section was previously published in *Foi et Vie* (1960); an English translation was included in Carl Mitcham and Jim Grote, eds., *Theology and Technology: Essays in Christian Analysis and Exegesis* (1984). [See also Ellul’s “The Relationship between Man and Creation in the Bible” in Mitcham and Grote.]

3. Limits (56 pages)

This longest chapter and deals with what Ellul clearly sees as a fundamental issue. To quote from Ellul’s own first paragraphs:

Fundamental question: Can human beings do everything or are they limited?

The question needs to be expanded:

— "Everything" means anything, indifferently, or the maximum possible?

— "Can" means what is possible or what is permitted?

— Are some domains forbidden? Forbidden because humans cannot get in (although science and Technique argue “not get in yet but tomorrow ...”) or forbidden because there is an absolute bar, impassable, established by God.

— Is the limit fixed by humans, in which case they may move it, or is from nature (in which case it is neutral), or is it from God? (p. 179)

Subsequent sections deal nature and creation, and the Judaism and Christianity as negation of limits.

4. Technique and Eschatology (25 pages)

Includes comments on the thought of Hans Jonas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Cornelius Castoriadis, Jean Ladrière, and others.

5. Ethical Mediation (46 pages)

6. Ethical Extensions (46 pages)

Chapters five and six revisit issues dealt with at length in Ellul’s more extended works on ethics (such as *To Will and To Do* [French 1964] and *On Freedom, Love and Power*, compiled, edited, and translated by Willem Vanderburg [2008]), but this time especially focused on relationships between ethics and Technique.

These six chapters are further complemented with five “Preliminary Works,” the first three of which have previously appeared in print. The first, “Intermezzo instinctive and unscientific” (10 pages) is an

engagement with the thought of René Girard. The second is another commentary on the situation of theology in the technical society (14 pages). The third is titled “Search for an Ethics in a technical society” (18 pages). This is followed by a bibliographical essay on theology and Technique (13 pages). The final fifth preliminary work is on “The Theological Status of Technique according to Gabriel Vahanian” (17 pages).

Finally the volume is further enhanced by Rognon’s 17-page introduction placing this book in the larger context of Ellul’s work. Rognon has added as well a useful bibliography.

The volume is clearly an important addition to Ellul’s body of work and one that deserves translation.

Technique, Language and the Divided Brain: Can recent insights from neuropsychology give new life to Jacques Ellul's technology criticism?

by Matthew Prior

Matthew Prior is a minister in the Church of England and graduate student in theology at Trinity College, University of Bristol, UK

Introduction: the word humiliated?

In the aftermath of the well publicised British riots of August 2011, I found myself thinking of Jacques Ellul. In the Clapham Junction area of South London, whilst stores selling high-end technology were being looted, *Waterstones*, the biggest bookseller in the UK, reported that its shop had been completely untouched. This only became a story with a tweeted invitation from a *Waterstones* staff member to the rioters to take some of their books. 'They might actually learn something', he sighed.¹ All over London, in areas well known to me from six years of Christian ministry in the capital, similar events took place, leading to a process of political and social soul-searching and reflection ongoing to this day.² And yet, the analyses suggested and the solutions put forward have seemed at least to me to be somewhat trite and hollow, on the one hand narrowly focussed on the analysis of 'twitter traffic' and the role of social media, and on the other trading in political generalities about urban poverty and the failure of urban education.³ I have wondered, what greater depth might Ellul's work offer to the Christian minister seeking to make sense of this potent mix of issues: urban dysfunction and violence, language and literacy, and the image-based technologies of a consumer society? In particular, what perspectives might emerge from a book I take to be one of Ellul's most enduring and significant contributions, *La parole humiliée* (1981; ET *The Humiliation of the Word*), a remarkable and still pertinent discussion of what happens to language in a technological society?

In *La parole humiliée* Ellul embarks on a sociological exploration of word and image within the framework of his central theological dialectic of truth and reality.⁴ Indeed, although this is listed as a sociological work, Ellul states explicitly: we are made in the image of a speaking God, and therefore we listen and we speak in response.⁵ In brief summary, the word pertains to what Ellul calls 'the order of truth', whereas the image pertains to 'the order of reality'. Disastrously separated in the 'rupture' from God's purposes, word and image are reunited for a time in the incarnation of the divine Word, Jesus Christ. Yet we still await the fulfilment of the promise when word and image are finally reconciled in a new creation.⁶ However, Ellul's concern is with an alternative modern eschatology: the victory of the image over the word, which eclipses the true horizon of future hope, offering either the hope of instant and constant satisfaction, or the despair of apocalypse now.⁷

The French commentator on Ellul, Frédéric Rognon, has referred to Ellul's 'thresholds of radicality'⁸, and I for one confess I do not share the entirety of Ellul's analysis of what he called the 'audiovisual war machine'. However, I still believe *La parole humiliée* has much to offer to a theological

understanding of our image-saturated communication culture today, principally because here a rich dialogue between theology and sociology takes place *within a single text*.⁹ In this paper, I make the bold claim that Ellul's best insights can be recollected and weaknesses offset by a dialogue with recent research into communication and the brain in the developing field of neuropsychology. Let me make a brief disclaimer at this point. I come at this dialogue theologically, and not as a neuropsychologist! What I offer is a tentative step forward for theological reflection on language, as well as, I hope, a tribute to Jacques Ellul from a British perspective.

A dialogue between Jacques Ellul and neuropsychology

Over the past thirty years, there has been an increasing *academic and popular* scientific interest in the study of communication, with the two meeting in the bestselling book by Steven Pinker *The Language Instinct*.¹⁰ Over this time, much Christian writing has focussed, perhaps naively, on questions of how to use new communication technologies; few have delved into properly *theological* questions about the nature of language itself. However, one exception to that is a remarkable recent book called *The Master and his Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* by Dr Iain McGilchrist, a British psychiatrist and literary scholar.¹¹

McGilchrist offers a distinctive narrative of the origins of human language, and at times on reading him, one has the impression of reading a scientific mapping of a landscape previously navigated by Ellul. What can account for this apparent overlap? As I have confirmed with McGilchrist, Ellul exercises no direct influence on him. Indeed, at the outset, one is also struck by a key difference between them, particularly in relation to *the status of the scientific method*.

In *La parole humiliée*, Ellul disavows any scientific or technical apparatus and advances instead the primacy of the feeling, listening and looking subject, an experimental method indebted to Søren Kierkegaard. In contrast, for McGilchrist, it is precisely neuro-scientific evidence that suggests that a dialectic of word and image is simplistic. For those who like me are interlopers in this area, let me briefly remind you that the brain is divided into two hemispheres, each exercising motor-sensory control of the opposite side of the body. There has long been evidence also to suggest that a degree of lateralisation of functions exists, for example, with regard to language, although it has become increasingly clear that almost every human activity is served at some level by both hemispheres. It is therefore no longer respectable for a neuroscientist to hypothesise on the key to hemispheric differences, partly because the topic has been hijacked.

At a popular level, there exists the notion of a 'right-brain' or 'left-brain' person. McGilchrist regards this popularised dichotomy as rooted in the ancient Greek association of the right hemisphere with subjective perception (pictures) and the left hemisphere with objective understanding (words).¹² He describes this view as interesting, but deeply flawed, moreover a symptom of the left hemisphere's dominance in Western culture. With a minutely detailed survey of recent research, he suggests that if the brain displays a fundamental asymmetry, it is a question not of *what functions*, as if the brain were a machine, but of how, *or the manner in which*, the hemispheres operate, as if the brain were part of a living person, which it is. Drawing on a parable of Nietzsche, he suggests that the right hemisphere is the Master and the left hemisphere is its Emissary, or interpreter.

But note that for McGilchrist, all neuroscience works, sometimes unawares, from a prior philosophical position. As he puts it, 'Not to be aware is to adopt the default standpoint of scientific materialism'; this again is a symptom of left-hemisphere bias. Indeed, he describes the essential

difference between the hemispheres *in terms of the awareness or attention they bring to bear*. To simplify vastly, the right hemisphere serves whole, sustained attention, concerned with *living in the present*, and living in the body. The left hemisphere serves focussed attention, concerned with *abstracting and re-presenting* a part of the lived world. He aligns his own attention to the world with phenomenology, drawing in particular upon Martin Heidegger. Indeed, McGilchrist regards Heidegger as having anticipated, before neuropsychology, this central importance of attention, particularly in Heidegger's concept of truth as 'unconcealing' over against the mindset of 'enframing'.¹³

Is this not then a familiar story: Heidegger's influence and Ellul's neglect? In part, yes. Of course, given that Ellul and Heidegger share a heritage in Kierkegaard, the influence of Kierkegaard in key passages of *La parole humiliée* leads to statements that resonate with Heidegger, and therefore with McGilchrist.¹⁴ Yet I suggest that Ellul's theology has more to offer than Heidegger's. Indeed, I *have suggested* to McGilchrist that Ellul's understanding of the human word can enrich the tentative theological conclusions he offers in concluding his neuropsychological account of language.¹⁵ I will return to that in closing, but let us first turn to a brief summary of *The Master and his Emissary*.

Language and the brain: what's right and what's left?

McGilchrist begins with the early consensus that speech production and comprehension was subserved by the left hemisphere, in Broca's area and Wernicke's area respectively.¹⁶ From there developed an explanation for the fundamental asymmetry of the human brain known as Yaklovlevian torque (see below)¹⁷: that the drive to language necessitated an expansion of the posterior left hemisphere, to house such a complex set of skills. Given that the dominant use of the right hand in tool manipulation is also housed in the left hemisphere, indeed in areas very close to those dealing with words, there appeared an evident connection between language and the hand. The idea took hold that the left hemisphere expanded to support both tool-making and also, in the closest possible connection, the development of the master tool, instrumental language.¹⁸ On this account, language is grasp, providing fixity by firming up and clarity by dividing up. It is a means to power, for by it we can manipulate the world, and indeed, other people.

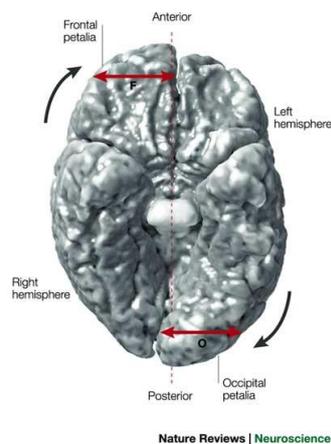


Figure 1: The brain viewed from above

McGilchrist celebrates what he calls ‘referential language’ as a vastly precious gift, yet he contends that this narrative is partial, and again biased towards the left hemisphere.¹⁹ He questions it with three pieces of evidence.

Firstly, engaging with recent palaeontology, he notes that early fossil records show that primitive humans, *long before it is believed that language developed*, had a similar brain asymmetry to us today, an asymmetry shared moreover by the great apes, *who, he says, clearly have no language*. So whatever caused the expansion of the left hemisphere, it was not the drive to speak, but something more primitive.²⁰

Secondly, more sophisticated recent accounts of brain functions now show that *language functions are lateralised across both hemispheres*. Yet McGilchrist goes further to assert the fundamental superiority of the right hemisphere, for what he calls the ‘higher linguistic functions’ of understanding meaning in context, tone, emotion, along with any humour, irony or metaphor, now appear to be housed in the right hemisphere. In simple terms, if language can be compared to painting a picture, it is the left that contains the paintbox, but the right hemisphere that paints.²¹ With examples from studies of tribal peoples, child development and the experience of patients with aphasia (or the loss of speech), he argues that thought exists prior to and without language.²² *In an image drawn from Michael Gazzaniga, he suggests that the left hemisphere is the right hemisphere’s interpreter*.

Thirdly, he highlights a fascinating recent discovery of handedness, suggesting that *even in left-handers* tool-use is associated with the left hemisphere, not the right hemisphere, which one would expect to be controlling the left hand side of the body. What seems crucial here is not the side of the body involved, but *the nature of the gesture*.²³ That is to say, it is the very concept of grasping that activates in the left hemisphere, not the control of the hand itself. By contrast, there is new evidence to suggest that gestures which are exploratory and empathic in nature originate in the right hemisphere, as indeed do other non-purposive gestures such as dance, a significant point, as we shall see.

Which came first: grasp or music?

This combination of factors leads McGilchrist to a fuller account of language. Clearly, the left hemisphere has specialised in the interpretive powers of syntax and vocabulary. But the left hemisphere’s expansion was not caused by the simple desire to communicate, but by the more primitive desire to manipulate. McGilchrist cites with approval Michael Coballis’ suggestion that *referential language* may indeed have evolved, *not from sounds at all, but from hand gesture, in particular, motions to do with grasping*²⁴.

But language is more than grasp. Even our most basic intuitions tell us much human language is connotative, social, without a clear purpose beyond communication itself. What then of this language that McGilchrist calls ‘I-Thou’ language, in contrast to ‘I-it’ language? On the conventional account, the apparently ‘useless’ ‘I-Thou’ language must have evolved from ‘I-It’ language to serve a broader utility, to enable the group to survive and to thrive. But does that fit the evidence? Anthropologists suggest that for long periods *before any evidence of symbol manipulation*, our ancestors clearly managed to live in social groups. Moreover, recent work on the fossil record suggests that the earliest human skeletons possessed the same highly developed vocal apparatus for articulating sounds that we have.²⁵ What was this apparatus used for, if anything? The answer put forward is likely to be a surprise, McGilchrist suggests, but what else could a non-verbal language of communication be but

music? Drawing on the recent book by the archaeologist Steven Mithen *The Singing Neanderthals*²⁶ he argues for a common ancestor for both language and music: so-called *musilanguage*. It is predominantly the right hemisphere that mediates our experience of music and dance, and therefore the musical and bodily aspects of language are subserved there also.²⁷

Granted that this account may seem implausible, what further evidence can be advanced in its favour? The idea that musilanguage preceded referential language easily fits with the fact of cultural history that poetry clearly precedes prose.²⁸ More significantly, metaphor precedes literal language, as the well known study by Lackoff and Johnson argues. Metaphor is, according to McGilchrist, closely linked to gesture, subserved by the right hemisphere. He argues that when we bring two things together, it is because they are felt as sharing a live connection in our embodied experience, not because they fit an abstract concept in our minds.²⁹ The example he gives is of a clash of cymbals and a clash of arguments, which do not depend on a notion of clash, just the uncomfortable experience of it. For McGilchrist, Metaphor therefore ‘carries us over’ the gap or abstraction from bodily life that literal language entails.

In the highly complex fifth chapter on the Master right hemisphere attention to our embodied experience of the world, McGilchrist draws on pioneering research into gesture by David McNeill, arguing that gesture slightly anticipates speech. On this account, gesture reveals utterances in their primitive form, derived from the right hemisphere. Bodily gestures do not therefore reflect thought – they help to constitute thought.³⁰

Attentive to the body

The significance of the body for McGilchrist cannot be overstated, and language is rooted in our bodily experience, the domain of the right hemisphere. At a popular level, body language is now recognised as a key component of communication,³¹ but the hypothesis of ‘musilanguage’ goes further. If it is correct, then anthropological speaking, language originates not in the competitive technique of the hand, but in the social gesture of the body. It is worth citing him at length to summarise the cumulative effect of his argument.

To the extent that the origins of language lie in music, they lie in a certain sort of gesture, that of dance: social, non-purposive (‘useless’). When language began to shift hemispheres, and separate itself from music, to become the referential, verbal medium that we recognise by the term, it aligned itself with a different kind of gesture, that of grasp, which is, by contrast, individualistic and purposive....³²

We glimpse here also his concern: what he calls a ‘hijack’ of language from the Master right hemisphere by the usurping left hemisphere. This entire project then, depends on becoming more aware of, attending to the origins of language in the body, served by the right hemisphere. He advances a final key piece of neuroscientific evidence. In the discussions of the dominant left hemisphere, it is often neglected that the human brain exhibits a fundamental asymmetry not only on the left side, *but also on the right frontal side*.³³ Why should this be the case? For McGilchrist, it is the expansion of the right frontal lobes in humans that gives us the capacity for whole attention, a certain distance, enabling us to stand back from our experience and to differentiate ourselves from others. This, uniquely, enables to exercise *empathy towards the other*, whom we can recognise as *somebody like us*. This attentive capacity of the right frontal lobe differentiates us from any other creature. Ultimately, what makes our language human is rooted in this standing back, the distance

from the other that produces the desire to reach out, and indeed to reach beyond to the divine Other. Animals may possess reason and a form of language:

But [he writes] there are many things of which they show no evidence whatsoever: for instance, imagination, creativity, the capacity for religious awe, music, dance, poetry, art, love of nature, a moral sense, a sense of humour and the ability to change their minds.³⁴

McGilchrist in dialogue with and defence of Ellul: the Word as Master

I hope the fruits of this dialogue will already be visible, despite the obvious limits. Of course, there are sparse references to the brain in *La Parole humiliée*³⁵ and no proto-historical narrative of the origins of language. Yet my overall contention in the paper, to repeat, is that Ellul's work anticipates the developing insights of neuropsychology, and can indeed enrich them. Let me give a few examples in closing.

In a remarkably attentive account of the spoken word, Ellul speaks of the word as a *living presence, requiring two persons in relationship in time*.³⁶ For Ellul also, it is in *dialogue and distance* that we discover 'le même-autre et... l'autre-même'.³⁷ Moreover, he argues theologically from the first creation, with reference to Adam's naming of the woman. 'La semblable dissemblable... Le discours recommence toujours parce que la distance subsiste'.³⁸

In this distance between speaker and listener, between speech and reception metaphor is born.³⁹ Almost each time Ellul speaks of *metaphor*, there is a trace of its etymology – 'carrying beyond'.⁴⁰ An extended metaphor that serves as a leitmotif for Ellul's account of the word is the musical image of a symphony.⁴¹ Harmony is the achievement of the word as music. By a *polyphony of overtones*, a *symphony of shared echoes* is established, which creates a *concordance*, never static but a movement in time.⁴² This richly poetic understanding of the word is clearly concordant with the notion of 'musilanguage' as outlined by McGilchrist. For Ellul, if the word has a power, it is a musical, metaphoric power to reach beyond words, beyond reality, to create another universe, what he calls 'the order of truth'.⁴³

In the second theological chapter, Ellul goes further. Since we are created in the image of God, the human word is ultimately a reflection of and response to the word God speaks. In a discussion of the biblical creation accounts, Ellul suggests that it is only the word, and not technique, that offers the power of new creation.⁴⁴ Yet this does not mean that technique has no place when restricted to the order of reality. However, in the fourth chapter from which *La parole humiliée* takes its title, Ellul's presents a sombre picture: whereas the word should give us the power to master technique, now the situation is reversed.⁴⁵

On the conventional narrative of language as manipulation, this opposition of word and technique appears absurd.⁴⁶ However, the alternative narrative of 'musilanguage' offers support for Ellul against his critics. Indeed, on my tentative reading, what Ellul means by 'word' maps well onto McGilchrist's account of the right hemisphere, but equally what he means by 'technique' maps well onto McGilchrist's account of the left hemisphere. Both have their role, as McGilchrist states: 'it would [not] be a good thing if the entire population had a left hemisphere stroke'.⁴⁷ Yet with a wealth of experimental data, McGilchrist offers the model of Right-Left-Right processing as a kind of

healthy norm.⁴⁸ In his terms, the left hemisphere, as Emissary, merely *re-presents* what is first *presented* to the Master right hemisphere. Moreover, it must then submit its representations back to the right hemisphere to be fleshed out in real life, in the musical aspects of communication and meaning. In Ellulian terms, this means a ‘both-and’ embodied, dialectical reasoning, in place of an ‘either-or’ abstract rationality.

Engaging in a similarly sweeping cultural history, McGilchrist considers that the abstract accounts of language in structuralism, universal grammar and in popular neurolinguistics form part of a general trend... ‘in favour of an abstracted, cerebralised, machine-like version of ourselves...’⁴⁹ There is hope, however, and McGilchrist writes in part with an apologetic purpose: to re-ground us and our language in the embodied world. With a rising interest in neuroscience, he detects an opportunity to ‘move away from the outworn mode of scientific materialism with its reductive language.’⁵⁰ In strikingly Ellulian terms, McGilchrist suggests to the reader the lost ‘mythos’ of the Christian tradition, for here a transcendent, divine Other, meets us as engaged, vulnerable, and incarnate, offering the hope of the flesh and spirit united in resurrection.⁵¹ This is a hope beyond images of apocalyptic despair or images of the latest must-have product, a hope that keeps us waiting in time, for the end of time, attending to the voice of God in the present, rooted in the real world.

But do I have any policy proposals on how to stop riots and save the inner city? Sadly, no. But I do offer a closing thought. Perhaps a Christian perspective on literacy and education in a technological society might focus more on the renewal of whole attention and empathy that disciplined study might enable, and less on the value of one kind of rationality, and its role in fitting us to be economically productive citizens? The current UK government wants to expand the national management and ICT cadres, ostensibly to keep pace with the UK’s global competitors, and yet there are also moves to put resources back into the neglected humanities, with a particular focus on urban schools. And yet perhaps rather than turn to government policy for the funding of empathy, might the church not first seek to discover how to be and to speak God’s embodied word in a technological society? Might we not first be challenged to a renewed listening to God, and listening to others, a renewed attentiveness to the actual physical world around us? After all, as British theologian Sarah Coakley has recently put it, ‘When you are working with people in a situation of grave distress and despair, it is the quality of your attention which is what ministry is about’.⁵²

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Endnotes

¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/booksblog/2011/aug/12/reading-riots-waterstones-looted-books>

² A little about my background. I am an ordained minister in the Church of England, and know well the areas South London affected by the rioting. My interest in Ellul was first kindled during my training for ministry, for here I found insights lacking in other elements of my training.

³ For example, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/aug/16/riots-poverty-map-suspects>.

⁴ As Rognon notes, the Truth-reality dialectic is a golden thread in Ellul's corpus (Rognon 2007, 83).

⁵ 'L'homme créé par Dieu est parlant. Peut-être que c'est un des sens de l'image de Dieu : le répondant, le responsable, le semblable qui va dialoguer....Spécificité humaine comme spécificité de ce Dieu parmi tous les autres'. Ellul 1981, 71

⁶ See Ibid, chapter 7, Reconciliation, passim.

⁷ 'Ces deux tendances: l'exigence de tout tout de suite, et la terreur de la fin du monde, issues de la multiplication infinie des images, se conjuguent pour provoquer partout des courants apocalyptiques et messianiques'. Ellul, 1981, 231.

⁸ On *Parole*, he notes three such thresholds: the absolute separation of sight and faith, the resulting denial that the image can lead to faith, and the claim that the church's current decline can be linked to its capitulation to the 'audiovisual machine' (Rognon: 365-366).

⁹ Whilst this narrative about the demise of the word and the rise of the image has precedence in Ellul's early theological work (See for example chapter 4 of *Présence au Monde Moderne*, on 'La communication'), the form of *La parole humiliée* is regarded as a sociological work. In fact, it does not easily fit into the dialectical division of the Ellul corpus: Joyce Main Hanks raises in the preface to her translation the question of Ellul's intention: 'the author has preferred to integrate sociology and theology into a single whole, for reasons he has not yet explained in print' (Hanks' preface in Eng. Tr. Ellul 1985, xii-xiii).

¹⁰ E.g. Steven Pinker's *The Language Instinct* and Michael Corballis' *From Hand to Mouth*.

¹¹ The book has rightly been acknowledged as a valuable and largely irenic contribution to a debate that raged through the first decade of this century in the UK, initiated by a more aggressive form of public atheism in British public life, labelled ‘new atheism’.

¹² See chapter 1, *Asymmetry and the Brain*.

¹³ *ibid* 143

¹⁴ In a section drawing on Kierkegaard, Ellul pointedly corrects the priority of *appearances* within phenomenology. ‘La phénoménologie ne doit pas seulement faire apparaître les choses telles qu’elles sont mais les faire sonner comme elles sont! La philosophie classique ne sait pas écouter, entendre la vérité... le philosophe qui refuse d’écouter refuse en meme temps la vérité et la réalité’ (Ellul 1981, 44). This priority of listening is the subject of Ellul’s second chapter on *l’Idole et la Parole*.

¹⁵ This has been confirmed in correspondence with the author. Although McGilchrist does not write as a theologian, his work has been eagerly received in theological circles in the UK.

¹⁶ McGilchrist 2009, 23.

¹⁷ McGilchrist, 2009, 23-24.

¹⁸ See the discussion of Language and the Hand, *ibid*, 111ff.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 24.

²⁰ *ibid*, 99.

²¹ McGilchrist 2009, 99.

²² McGilchrist 2009, 105-110. ²² With clear echos of Ellul’s concerns (See Ellul, 1981, 22ff) McGilchrist refutes ‘structuralist’ communication theories, asserting that meaning does indeed exist prior to and outside of the structures of language, in our prior apprehension of the world.

²³ *ibid*, 113.

²⁴ *ibid* 111.

²⁵ *Ibid*.101.

²⁶ He also draws on and the work of the linguist Daniel Everett, who undertook a controversial recent study of the Piraha tribe in the Amazon basin, concluding that they communicate by a form of musi-language (*ibid*. 2009,106).

²⁷ *Ibid*,102.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 105

²⁹ The implicit comparison we make between one thing and another cannot be ‘translated’ into another set of words by the interpreting left hemisphere without losing its power and novelty. McGilchrist argues that we do not first assume there is an abstract concept to which the two things both conform – rather, that our simple *experience* of their similarity, as processed by the master right hemisphere, comes first. In an interesting twist which seems to confirm this, some studies show that clichéd, familiar metaphors are understood by the left hemisphere, suggesting that they have lost their original connection with lived experience. McGilchrist, 2009, 116.

³⁰ Ibid, 119. Whilst he offers support for McGilchrist's project, the prominent British philosopher A.C. Grayling registers his dissent by noting that 'the findings of brain science are nowhere near fine-grained enough yet to support the large psychological and cultural conclusions Iain McGilchrist draws'. In Grayling, A.C. (December 2009). "In Two Minds". *Literary Review*.

³¹ McGilchrist agrees that the left hemisphere's ability with words can be an attempt to hide what gesture reveals (Ibid, 81, 195ff).

³² Ibid, 119. The fact that 'musilanguage' would yield little competitive advantage in evolutionary terms has led some to reject the idea of 'musilanguage' as implausible (ibid 104, citing Pinker). McGilchrist defends his view by arguing *ad hominem* from utility: 'If language began in music, it began in (right-hemisphere) functions which are related to empathy and common life, not competition and division' (123).

³³ Ibid, 126.

³⁴ Ibid, 127.

³⁵ Ellul notes the misinterpretation of an early neuropsychology experiment undertaken by British scientists (Ibid, 185 n1). He also takes issue with the work of Michel Thevoz in 'Le Langage de la rupture', a study of the language of the mentally ill (198).

³⁶ 'La parole est essentiellement présence. Elle est du vivant. Jamais objet'. Ellul 1981, 20. Only when written does it become an object, requiring focussed attention, rather than the 'coup d'oeil global' that spoken language enables. Ellul's treatment alludes, often in disagreement, to the seminal work of Marshall McLuhan (see, e.g. 31 n1).

³⁷ Ibid, 21.

³⁸ Ibid, 22.

³⁹ 'Là prennent naissance le symbole, la métaphore et l'analogie'. Ellul 1981, 24.

⁴⁰ See for example 26-27, 37, 77-78 (in brief dialogue with Paul Ricoeur), 119, 181.

⁴¹ 'Connotations et harmoniques. Et la parole se situe au cœur d'une toile d'araignée d'une finesse infinie'. Ibid, 22

⁴² Ibid, 24-25

⁴³ 'La parole n'est pas liée au réel mais à sa capacité de création de cet univers autre, sur-réel si on veut, meta-réel, métaphysique, que par commodité on peut nommer l'ordre du vrai'. Ellul 1981, 27.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 76.

⁴⁵ Ellul, 1981 :177.

⁴⁶ The French critic of Ellul, Dominique Bourg, suggests this in his book, *L'Homme-Artifice*, repeating the common anthropological account of language's origins.

⁴⁷ *ibid.* 93.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 195-203. In a very brief metaphor, he suggests that the relationship between the hemispheres is a little like the way books relate to life. Life goes into books, and books go into life. But the relationship between them is not equal, and yet books add to life, and transform it.

⁴⁹ McGilchrist, 2009, 119-120

⁵⁰ McGilchrist, 2009, 459

⁵¹ Ibid. 441

⁵² Stephen Wilson, ' Sarah Coakley discusses waiting on God', CAM Magazine, Issue 65, Easter 2012, 43.

An Unjust God? A Christian Theology of Israel in Light of Romans 9-11.

by Jacques Ellul

Trans. by Anne-Marie Andreasson-Hogg. Forward by David W. Gill.

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Jacques Ellul was many things—law professor, sociologist, philosopher, et al.—but he was not a formally-trained biblical studies expert. So why does he write a book based in a particular biblical text? We will discuss his reasons to some degree below, but let me say now: I am glad he did.

An Unjust God? is simply structured. After a brief preface outlining the argument of the book in good Barthian fashion by stating a number of apparent contradictions Paul solves in the selected text, in five chapters Ellul divides the text of Romans 9-11 into five sections: “The Unique People,” “This Unjust God,” “How Will They Believe?,” “The Grafted Olive Tree,” and “Mystery and Renewal.” The book then concludes with an Epilogue, an appendix on the suffering servant surveying the work of Armand Abécassis and a brief bibliography.

An Unjust God? makes no claims to precise biblical exegesis; it is a work of biblical theology, not of historical/grammatical criticism. New Testament exegesis, for example, is generally filled with discussion of words and phrases, how they are used in the grammatical and literary context of the passage, and how they are used in other relevant contexts in other ancient writings. Ellul rarely refers to the underlying Greek text; even when he does, he discusses it in general terms that are secondary to his more theological concerns.

When he does refer to a term, he depends on the exegesis of others and can get himself in trouble. So, for instance, when apparently referring to the phrase “zwh\ e'k nekrw\̂n” (zoe ek nekron) in Romans 11:15 he states “This word ‘vivification’ (which Maillot translates as ‘life surging out of death’) is not quite identical with resurrection” (p. 71), he betrays the fact that he is unaware the underlying Greek is actually in a phrase, not a word. More importantly, he goes on to build a case for the meaning of the phrase, as if its interpretation is relatively stable, when in fact it is one of the most controversial phrases in the whole of the exegesis of Romans 9-11.

Deeper problems result from his lack of insight into the processes of biblical interpretation at the level he seeks with this book. For instance he castigates other interpreters of the role of the Jewish people in Christian thought for eschewing what he calls “the only indisputable and *comprehensive* [italics his] source” for “what a Christian theology of the people of Israel should be,” going on to ignore the Gospels because they give us “indications, but only concerning individuals or certain groups belonging to the Jewish people, not anything about the people as a whole... we have an exact and precise answer to that question [‘understanding where the Jewish people are to be situated in a Christian perspective or what is

continued existence means’] in these three chapters of the Epistle to the Romans—there, and nowhere else in the new Testament” (pp. 2-3).

Yet every Gospels researcher knows that the crowds serve just that function in Matthew’s and John’s Gospels particularly and that the whole Old Testament is filled with prophetic and other material important to the theologian for understanding the Jews in the present day. This is not to argue with the centrality of Romans 9-11 for this question; it is only to say that Ellul should not have looked exclusively to this text in such an absolute fashion.

No, this little book is not a study in the detailed exegesis of Romans 9-11. So has Ellul gotten into waters over his head and given us a book of little worth? And does Ellul’s lack of exegetical training mean that he has regularly misused the biblical text for his own purposes? Paul himself might say, “By no means!” What he has done is enter into the world of biblical theology, and there his legal experience and skills serve him in good stead. Biblical theology, or surmising from the text what it has to say to a question relevant both to the text and the reader, is much more an exercise in logic and argument than it is one of translation.

In what Ellul has attempted to do, he shines. I should point out that he claims no creative stance in this book. From the start Ellul makes it quite clear that he is attempting to get people to take seriously work from the past that he believes has gotten the question right, particularly some articles by Wilhelm Vischer, and, to a lesser extent, the famous *The Epistle to the Romans* by Karl Barth. He refers often to Vischer and his work, but differs from Barth on his focus on the church in his interpretation of Romans 9-11, when Ellul firmly believes the chapters have much more to do with the Jews.

So what is the great accomplishment of *An Unjust God*? Simply put, Ellul puts forth a case for the continued importance of the Jews in God’s salvation history of humankind that is rigorously argued, clearly enough written, and presented with a passion. At the same time, he proclaims a word of judgment upon the largely Gentile church for not living and acting in accord with the place and privilege bestowed upon it since the “temporary” rejection of the Jews. One could argue with his lack of reference to the history of these chapters, a source rich and replete with both counters to, and support for, many of his positions, but he has given us a simple, straightforward argument for a Christian rapprochement with the Jews, and that is a welcome text to have in these angry, adversative times.