

## Ellul's Life and Thought

ALTHOUGH JACQUES ELLUL WROTE over fifty books and one thousand articles during his career, his life involved much more than a professor's typical labors of lecturing and writing.<sup>1</sup> Andrew Goddard has aptly commented that "Ellul's life and his thought are intricately interwoven. He wrote out of what he lived and he lived out what he wrote."<sup>2</sup> This chapter aims to set the stage for understanding Ellul's thought by locating his writings in the context of his life.

### Early Years and Education

Jacques César Ellul was born on January 6, 1912, in Bordeaux, France.<sup>3</sup> He spent almost his entire life in the southwest region of his home country, some six hundred kilometers removed from Paris. He was the only child of Joseph and Martha Ellul. Joseph Ellul was an Austrian subject of Serbian-Italian heritage, and Martha Ellul was French from Portuguese-Jewish

1. The most complete record of Ellul's writings is found in Hanks, *Annotated Bibliography*.

2. Goddard, *Living the Word*, 2.

3. No one has yet written a comprehensive biography of Ellul. He apparently wrote an extensive autobiography that has not been made public. The main sources for his life are extensive interviews he gave on various occasions, which have been collected into individual volumes. See Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*; Ellul, *Perspectives*; Ellul, *Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics*. In addition, there is a fifty-four-minute film titled *The Betrayal by Technology: A Portrait of Jacques Ellul* made by Jan van Boekel, based on interviews filmed in 1990. See also Goddard, "Obituary."

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ancestry. Ellul was “what people call a *mètèque*, a product of the melting pot,”<sup>4</sup> as he recalled in reflection upon his mixed heritage. *Mètèque* is a derogatory term in France for Mediterranean foreigners, suggesting Ellul’s identity as an outsider to the mainstream of French society. Although both of his parents had been raised in aristocratic families, the Ellul family lived in poverty. His mother was a painter and teacher of art lessons. His father was a businessman who struggled through the economic catastrophe of the Depression, often without steady work. Ellul said: “One of the most important, most decisive elements in my life was that I grew up in a rather poor family. I experienced true poverty in every way, and I know very well the life of a family in a wretched milieu, with all the educational problems that this involves and the difficulties of having to work while still very young. I had to make my living from the age of fifteen, and I pursued all my studies while earning my own and sometimes my family’s livelihood.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite this, Ellul recalled a happy childhood, spending time on the docks at the port of Bordeaux and visiting the *Jardin Public* with its trees, ponds, and fountains. His only “bad memory” was “harassment in high school because I was the smallest in the class—and the best student.”<sup>6</sup> He writes of loving parents: “I lived with two parents who loved me very much, but in completely different ways. My father was very distant . . . my mother was very close to me, though extremely reserved.”<sup>7</sup> Concerning his religious upbringing, Ellul stated that he “really did not have any at all.” His father was “a skeptic, a Voltairian” in outlook, and therefore quite critical of religion. “He didn’t forbid that I receive any kind of Christian education, but nothing was done in that direction.”<sup>8</sup> His mother was a Protestant whom Ellul describes as “deeply religious” but who kept her faith to herself: “she never spoke to me about it; she never told me anything.”<sup>9</sup> Despite this situation, as a child he read the Bible by himself. Ellul was not raised in “a Christian atmosphere” but later experienced a dramatic Christian conversion.

Despite the family’s poverty, when Ellul graduated from high school, his mother insisted that he begin university rather than get a job immediately. His father overruled Ellul’s desire for a career as a naval officer and

4. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 4–5.

5. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 1.

6. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 7.

7. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 2.

8. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 13.

9. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 2.

steered him toward law.<sup>10</sup> This resonated for pragmatic reasons; according to Ellul, law “was a subject that seemed to lead to a profession, and the study of it was relatively short. Those were frankly the only reasons I had for choosing it.”<sup>11</sup> He began his studies in law at the University of Bordeaux in 1929, the year of the worldwide economic crash. He completed his *licence en droit* in 1931 and his *licence libre et lettres* in 1932; after his mandatory military service during 1934–35, he completed his doctoral thesis in 1936 on an ancient Roman legal institution, the *mancipium* (the right of father to sell children). During 1937, he taught at Montpellier and then in 1938 took a position at Strasbourg University.

## Turning Points

Early in his law studies there were two decisive events—reading Karl Marx and becoming a Christian.<sup>12</sup> Of his conversion, Ellul said, “I was alone in the house busy translating Faust when suddenly, and I have no doubts on this at all, I knew myself to be in the presence of something so astounding, so overwhelming that entered me to the very centre of my being. That’s all I can tell you. I was so moved that I left the room in a stunned state. In the courtyard there was a bicycle lying around. I jumped on it and fled.”<sup>13</sup> He explained:

I was converted—not by someone, nor can I say I converted myself. It is a very personal story, but I will say it was a very brutal and very sudden conversion. . . . From that moment on, I lived through the conflict and contradiction between what became the center of my life—this faith, this reference to the Bible, which I henceforth read from a different perspective—and what I knew of Marx and did not wish to abandon. For I did not see why I should have to give up the things that Marx said about society and explained about economy and injustice in the world. I saw no reason to reject them just because I was now a Christian.<sup>14</sup>

10. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 19. It should be noted that the study of law in early twentieth-century France was the study of social institutions, rather than preparation for the practice of law or a career as an attorney.

11. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 4.

12. Ellul, *Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics*, 55.

13. *Ibid.*, 52.

14. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 11–12.

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One of the most important elements of his conversion was that Ellul encountered the Bible in a new way. He recalled that reading the eighth chapter of Paul's letter to the Romans was "a watershed in my life. In fact, it was such a totally decisive experience that it became one of the steps in my conversion. And for the first time in my life, a biblical text really became God's Word to me. . . . It became a living contemporary Word, which I could no longer question, which was beyond all discussion. And that Word then became the point of departure for all my reflection in the faith."<sup>15</sup>

Regarding his encounter with Marx, Ellul explained:

In 1930, I discovered Marx. I read *Das Kapital* and I felt I understood everything. I felt that at last I knew why my father was out of work, at last I knew why we were destitute. For a boy of seventeen, perhaps eighteen, it was an astonishing revelation about the society he lived in. It also illuminated the working-class condition I had plunged into and those dealings at the port of Bordeaux . . . Thus, for me, Marx was an astonishing discovery of the reality of this world . . . I plunged into Marx's thinking with an incredible joy: I had finally found *the* explanation . . . Marx provided an intellectual formulation of what, for me, had to come from experience, from life, from concrete reality.<sup>16</sup>

As his own writings unfolded, Ellul's viewpoint imitated Marx's at least in its search for a comprehensive explanation of the social realities of the modern world. In this sense, Marx's work was an inspiration and model. Ellul commented: "As I became more and more familiar with Marxist thought, I discovered that his was not only an economic system, not only the exposure of the mechanics of capitalism. It was a total vision of the human race, society, and history. And since I did not follow any creed, religion, or philosophy . . . I was bound to find something extremely satisfying in Marx."<sup>17</sup> In an important early essay, Ellul argued that a "new Karl Marx" was needed. He wrote, "Marx was the only man of his time who grasped the totality of the social, political, and economic problems in their reality and posed correctly the questions [facing] the civilization of the nineteenth century."<sup>18</sup> Writing in 1947, Ellul commented that "what seems absolutely

15. Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," 28.

16. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 4–6.

17. *Ibid.*, 5.

18. Ellul, "New Karl Marx," 38.

necessary today is to do again precisely the same work that Karl Marx did a hundred years ago.”<sup>19</sup>

Ellul was influenced by Marx's understanding of a “materialist conception of history,” according to which human history is shaped decisively by material factors more than changes of ideas. Ellul realized that in the twentieth century, changes in technology were producing profound changes in social organization. Ellul was not uncritical of Marx on certain key points, but was particularly indebted to Marx for pointing him toward the issue of social revolution as a major concern; for increasing his awareness of economic realities and interests in the analysis of any ideology or theory; and for inspiring his “decision to side with the poor . . . with people who are alienated at all levels.” It was because of Marx that he “sided with the excluded, sided with the unfit, sided with those on the fringes.”<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that Ellul stated, “In the religious area . . . Marx had no influence at all. . . . I was not particularly touched by his arguments about religion and God.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite Ellul's admiration for Marx, he realized that “Marx did not have answers for everything. . . . In regard to life itself, a certain number of problems were still open. It was here that the Bible gave me more, establishing itself in my life on a different level than Marx's explanations about society. In the Bible, I was led to discover an entire world that was very new to me . . . a new world when I compared it with the realities of life and of my life and experience.”<sup>22</sup>

## **Friendships and Family**

Ellul stated that “two writings—Marx and the Gospel—and then two people—Jean Bosc and Bernard Charbonneau—formed my personality.”<sup>23</sup> Ellul described himself as a “man of friendships” with “some of the most astonishing and extraordinary friends.”<sup>24</sup> In particular, two close friends, Charbonneau (1910–1996) and Bosc (1910–1969), played key roles in Ellul's life and intellectual development. Ellul met Charbonneau in high

19. Ellul, *Sources and Trajectories*, 40.

20. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 9–10.

21. *Ibid.*, 10.

22. *Ibid.*, 11.

23. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 27.

24. *Ibid.*, 23.

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school and they remained in close contact throughout their lives. Charbonneau was a non-Christian philosopher, social critic, and environmentalist, whom Ellul considered “one of the rare geniuses of our time.”<sup>25</sup> Ellul always credited Charbonneau with having “a decisive influence on my choice of direction in research and thought”; Charbonneau, he said, taught him “how to ‘think.’ But he also taught me to see the reality of society, instead of looking only into my books. He taught me to consider actively the social fact, ‘what is really happening’—to analyze, to criticize, to understand it.”<sup>26</sup> Charbonneau’s critical importance for Ellul was directing him toward research on the subject of technique, which would become the main focus of Ellul’s sociological works.

Bosc, a Reformed Church pastor, introduced Ellul and many others in France to the theology of Karl Barth. Bosc served as director of the French biweekly journal *Foi & Vie: La Revue de Culture Protestante (Faith & Life: The Protestant Review of Culture)* between 1957 and 1969. Ellul succeeded him in this role, serving between 1969 and 1986, and wrote approximately seventy articles for the journal. Ellul had the highest praise for Bosc as an exemplary Christian whose presence was “like the presence of God’s love.”<sup>27</sup>

Finally, Ellul described meeting his wife, Yvette, as “the most decisive turning point” in his life.<sup>28</sup> They married in 1937. Together they had four children: Jean, Simon, Yves, and Dominique. He credited Yvette as the one who “helped me learn to live . . . she also taught me to listen.”<sup>29</sup> It was his relationship with Yvette that kept Ellul from traveling to Spain in order to fight in the Spanish Civil War. In one of the books of his interviews, he complained that academic and public life “is always about *me*, whereas I can’t think of myself without her.”<sup>30</sup> After her death in 1991, Ellul was distraught, grieving intensely until his own death on May 19, 1994.

## Politics and Resistance

Ellul commented that “after 1933 . . . I got very deeply involved in politics.” He was “part of the crowd” during the riot on February 6, 1934, in Paris,

25. *Ibid.*, 26.

26. Ellul, “Response,” 14.

27. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 28.

28. *Ibid.*, 31.

29. Ellul, *Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics*, 93.

30. Garrigou-Lagrange, *In Season*, 32.

instigated by right-wing factions that involved an attempted violent coup. In 1935, he attended a Nazi gathering in Munich “out of curiosity,” and recalled that “it was fascinating to see how easily a crowd could be whipped up and welded into a single unit.” In 1936, he participated in the Popular Front (an alliance of left-wing movements in the inter-war years in France). During 1937, Ellul had a “modest part” in supplying combatants in the Spanish Civil War, but he never gives much detail about his involvement.

From 1937 to 1939, Ellul served as a lecturer at Strasbourg University, a position from which he was summarily dismissed after being interrogated by police on the grounds that he had given a political talk to students from Alsace, had made “hostile” statements, and had a “foreigner” for a father. His father was arrested and imprisoned. Ellul last saw him in prison, where he died in 1942, during the German occupation of the country.

During the occupation, Ellul was “forced to join the Resistance. It was necessity, not virtue.”<sup>31</sup> Apparently, since his wife was born in Holland and had a British passport, she was slated to be arrested. They relocated for four years to a “free zone” in the village of Martres, some fifty kilometers outside Bordeaux. To support his family during this time, Ellul became a farmer, tending sheep and growing potatoes. Ellul harvested his first ton of potatoes as he was receiving his *agrégation* (the qualifying exam for university teaching) in Roman Law in 1943. In this period, Ellul was assisting Jews to escape the Holocaust by helping them get to the free French zone: “I found false papers for them. I also organized local Resistance groups to serve as links to the *maquis*, the guerrilla soldiers in the outlying areas.” Ellul recalled that he was “able to provide a whole series of people with forged identity cards or forged ration books.”<sup>32</sup> For his efforts, Ellul was awarded the designation “Righteous Among the Nations” in 2001 by Yad Vashem, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem.

At the close of the war, Ellul briefly served as a member of the Bordeaux city administration (October 1944–April 1945), responsible for public works and commerce. This experience was not a positive one. He commented: “Some of my books, for instance, *The Political Illusion*, derive in part from my experience in the political milieu—from politicians’ inability to really change the world they live in, the enormous influence of administrative bodies. The politician is powerless against government

31. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 17.

32. Ellul, *Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics*, 76.

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bureaucracy; society cannot be changed through political action.”<sup>33</sup> In part because of his experience in municipal public administration, Ellul preferred small-scale, community-based, and nongovernmental social involvement. Between 1945 and 1955, he was director of a Bordeaux film club analyzing contemporary cinema.<sup>34</sup> He was president from 1958 to 1976 of an organization that worked directly with “social misfits” and street gangs. In addition to acting as liaison with police and the legal system on behalf of the youth, Ellul led Bible studies as part of the group’s program. He also became active in an environmental organization dedicated to preserving the Aquitaine region on the French coast.

### Philosophical Commitments and Ecclesiastical Involvement

Meanwhile, during the mid-1930s Ellul became involved in the personalist movement led by Emmanuel Mounier, author of *The Personalist Manifesto* and editor of the magazine *Espirit*. The personalist movement found its basis in the Roman Catholic tradition and sought to relate Christian faith to the critical social problems of its day. In large measure, it was a response to the worldwide economic conditions after the Wall Street crash in 1929. In general terms, the movement was critical of capitalism for its neglect of the human person in favor of economic profit. Mounier wrote: “We shall apply the term personalist to any doctrine or any civilization that affirms the primacy of the human person over material necessities and over the whole complex of implements man needs for the development of his person.”<sup>35</sup> It emphasized the primacy of love with the motto “to be human is to love.” Ellul recalled his involvement, saying: “We felt that a human being is a person, which means that a society must be structured purely toward developing this personhood and rejecting alienation. But on the other hand, one can be a person only if one belongs to a group, only if one belongs to a community. . . . [As for party commitments,] we belonged to no political party, we were chiefly anti-Fascist.”<sup>36</sup>

In terms of ecclesiastical involvement, Ellul became a lay pastor when he discovered an “abandoned Protestant church” in the village of Martres “which had no leadership.” Ellul restarted it in 1943 with “regular worship

33. Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness*, 121.

34. Goddard, *Living the Word*, 37n83.

35. Mounier, *Personalist Manifesto*, 1.

36. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 15–16.



under my direction.” At first, the Elluls held services in their dining room. The church experienced rapid growth, especially of working-class families. As churchman, Ellul was also involved in the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1945, gave lectures at the Bossey Ecumenical Institute in 1946, and served on WCC commissions. He was a major figure in preparation for the 1948 First Assembly of WCC (Amsterdam), where he presented a paper titled “The Situation in Europe.”<sup>37</sup> However, Ellul became disillusioned with the WCC’s theology, social analysis, and “bureaucratic system” in the early 1950s and ceased to be involved with the organization.

He was also a member of the National Council of the French Reformed Church (consisting of twenty members, including ten laypeople) between 1951 and 1970. This experience, too, proved disappointing. Of his involvement, he wrote, “I realized the Church would have to be changed, in order to become the leaven, a force for change in society. So I began to try to change the Reformed Church. I worked at it for fifteen years. It was a difficult job. Ultimately, I failed.”<sup>38</sup> He later concluded that the Church was incapable of reforming itself, that it was “bogged down in the traditionalism of Christians . . . Once a movement becomes an institution, it is lost.”<sup>39</sup>

## **Academic Career and Writings**

From 1944 until his retirement in 1980, Jacques Ellul was Professor of the History and Sociology of Institutions in the Faculty of Law and Professor in the Institute for Political Studies. He taught Roman law, philosophy of law, and Marx and Marxism. As a legal scholar, his major work is a five-volume *opus*, *Histoire des institutions*, which treats the development of legal institutions from antiquity to the nineteenth century (it has not yet been translated into English).<sup>40</sup>

Ellul’s varied experiences of poverty, close friendship, dramatic conversion, Marxism, politics, dislocation, resistance, government administration, interventions among juvenile delinquents, and pastoral work were major sources of reflection in his work as an author. He defined his life’s work in terms of understanding the modern world. There is no mistaking his overall project as an explicitly Christian intellectual endeavor. Ellul

37. Ellul, “Situation in Europe.”

38. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 19.

39. *Ibid.*, 20.

40. Ellul, *Histoire des institutions*.

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wrote: “the sociological state of the world in which we live is rather desperate, so that it is difficult for modern people, deprived of hope and given over to immediate pleasure and unconscious fear of tomorrow, to proclaim the hope of faith in Christ and in the possibility for true love. This is one major purpose that has oriented my whole life.”<sup>41</sup> He said that he worked “without genius but with perseverance, without a transcending inspiration, but out of the conviction that my task was to unveil the realities to that man and of that time, which nobody seemed to take into account and which appeared to me to be decisive.”<sup>42</sup> In Ellul’s introduction to his book *The Humiliation of the Word*, he describes his stance as a Christian scholar: “I am not pretending to push forward scientific frontiers. Rather, I try to do here the same thing I do in all my books: face, alone, this world I live in, try to understand it, and confront it with another reality I live in, but which is utterly unverifiable.”<sup>43</sup> In scientific terms, Ellul’s faith in God is “utterly unverifiable” yet unquestionably real. From the standpoint of Ellul’s theology, the modern world and biblical faith stand in a relation of tension.

Ellul did not consider himself to be a theologian, yet he wrote sophisticated theological works throughout his entire adult life. His favorite Christian thinker was the Swiss Reformed theologian Karl Barth (1886–1968), whom he preferred to John Calvin (1509–1564), the fountainhead of Reformed theology. Said Ellul: “Calvin was impossible! I spent a whole year in the early forties studying him alone. I was very unhappy with it. I cannot get into Calvin’s way of reasoning.”<sup>44</sup> Of Calvin’s *Institutes*, he wrote: “I read the whole work and believe me I found it deadly boring. I have never been attracted by that kind of rigor.”<sup>45</sup> Ellul’s own temperament comes through clearly when he states: “Calvin constantly offers answers, solutions, or a construction, while Barth launches you into an adventure.”<sup>46</sup>

Ellul regarded Barth, on the other hand, as “the second great element in my intellectual life” after Marx.<sup>47</sup> The significance of his discovery of Barth, himself a socialist by political persuasion, can hardly be overstated. Ellul remarked: “Barth was a signpost showing how one could get beyond

41. Ellul, “Response,” 15.

42. *Ibid.*, 14.

43. Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, 1.

44. Ellul, “Man Who Asks Hard Questions,” 18.

45. Ellul, *Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics*, 49.

46. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 14.

47. *Ibid.*, 14. See Bromiley, “Barth’s Influence.”

the stage of pure and simple contradiction between Christian faith and Karl Marx.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, Ellul saw his chief intellectual project as arising from Barth’s work. He stated: “I had the impression that the ethical consequences of Barth’s theology had never been elicited. I was not satisfied with his volumes of ethics and politics, which seemed to be based on an insufficient knowledge of the world and of politics. However, there was everything there necessary to formulate an ethic without losing any of the rediscovered truth, being totally faithful to the Scriptures, but without legalism or literalism. But this work seemed possible to me only if one conserved the groundwork laid by Barth and did not start over again.”<sup>49</sup>

Building on a foundation of Marxist analytical inclinations and Barthian theology, Ellul was an immensely prolific writer, almost entirely on subjects outside his professional specialization in law. There are two main categories of his writings: social theoretical and theological.<sup>50</sup> Ellul commented: “I have always tried to prevent ‘my’ theology from influencing my sociological research and my comprehension of the world from distorting my reading of the Bible. These were two domains, two methods, two distinct interests. Only after the separation, one begins to perceive relationship.”<sup>51</sup> He added: “These two elements are closely linked, because on the one hand it is only by this faith in Jesus Christ that I could do this analysis of society, and on the other hand, my analysis of the technological world demanded a more and more vigorous faith from me and an increasingly exact theological knowledge.”<sup>52</sup> The major sociological works include *The Technological Society* (followed by *The Technological System* and *The Technological Bluff*); *Propaganda*; *The Political Illusion*; *The Humiliation of the Word*; and *The Betrayal of the West*. His main biblical, theological, and ethical works include books such as *Prayer and Modern Man*; *The Meaning of the City*; *Money and Power*; *To Will and to Do*; *The Ethics of Freedom*; and *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, as well as biblical expositions on various books of the Bible. Throughout our study of Ellul, we will engage many of

48. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 14.

49. Ellul, “Karl Barth and Us,” 24.

50. Music aficionados will be interested to know that, according to an undocumented source, Ellul wrote to music. He listened to Mozart as he wrote his theological works and composed *The Technological Society* while listening to Bach’s *Brandenburg Concertos*.

51. Ellul, “Response,” 15.

52. Ellul, *Perspectives*, 75.

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these volumes, attempting to forge a path toward an understanding of the corpus as a whole in the concluding chapter.

### Ellul as an Outsider

A helpful way of putting Ellul's life and thought in perspective is to recognize that he was a person from the margins who brought an outsider's viewpoint to both his theory and practice. Unlike most prominent intellectuals of the twentieth century, he grew up in poverty, unfamiliar with the advantages of wealth. Despite his French citizenship, he was considered a "foreigner" in his own country due to his mixed heritage. He was from the outlying provinces, not from Paris, the center of French intellectual and social life. Ellul recounted once being asked by a journalist, "But how can you be an intellectual if you live in the provinces?"<sup>53</sup> He wrote only in French and did not speak English well. He never traveled to the United States, yet his popularity was and is highest in American circles. As far as politics were concerned, he "refused to join any mainstream political currents."<sup>54</sup>

Ellul embraced Christianity as an outsider to the faith, having been raised in a non-Christian home, and then advocated for the Christian cause with single-minded zeal. As a Christian he occupied the margins of French academic life, which was heavily secular in outlook. Within a historically Roman Catholic nation, he was a member of the tiny Reformed Protestant church. Within the church, he was a layman, not possessed of the power and privileges of a clergyman. He did relatively little writing in his academic specialty in law; most of his writings are those of a nonspecialist aimed at a nonspecialist audience. As a legal and historical scholar without formal theological training, he was never part of the mainstream in academic theology; despite his many theological books, he always disavowed any claim to be a theologian. Within the Reformed tradition, he was sharply critical of John Calvin and standard Calvinist doctrines and upheld a minority viewpoint associated with Karl Barth. As a biblical interpreter, his views are hardly conventional and often idiosyncratic. As a Christian thinker, he offered a prophetic critique of virtually all areas of life, secular and sacred, and tended to resist the status quo. Like the biblical prophets, he relentlessly challenged established orthodoxies and proposed radical alternatives, and he was often dismissed as eccentric. In all these ways, Ellul was a marginal

53. Ellul, *Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics*, 21.

54. *Ibid.*

figure. He commented that “it is obvious that I have always found myself alone and out of place.”<sup>55</sup> This marginality, this outsider status, shaped his scholarship and activism in definitive ways, perhaps contributing to Ellul’s productivity and prescience and certainly giving a distinctive character to his life and work.

## **The Presence of the Kingdom as Preview of Ellul’s Thought**

Ellul believed that his short book *The Presence of the Kingdom* provided an introduction to his entire set of writings.<sup>56</sup> For our purposes in setting the stage for a comprehensive exposition and analysis of Ellul’s thought, we will offer a synopsis of the main themes of *Presence*, since it is so suggestive of the main directions for his later thought.

The book was first published in French in 1948 with the title, *Presence au monde modern: Problemes de la civilization post-chretienne* (literally, *Presence in the Modern World: Problems of Post-Christian Civilization*). Ellul’s preface to the second edition of the book states that he wrote “on the presence of the Christian in today’s world—not in the world in general, but in the world as it was.”<sup>57</sup> The book has a preface, four chapters, and ends with a “Prologue and Conclusion.” At the very end of the book, he tells the reader that it has been offered “to open the way for a work of the renewed church.”<sup>58</sup>

In the preface, Ellul explains that the work is oriented by the challenge announced by the Apostle Paul in Rom 12:2: “Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.” In response to this instruction, Ellul writes, “I had to apply myself in discerning what were the foundations, the structures, the make-up of the present age: that is to say, of the twentieth century.”<sup>59</sup> He became concerned to understand the “facts” of society on their own terms, but in “the light of Jesus Christ.” As such, the book is one of a few to bring together the rudiments of Ellul’s social analysis and the main themes of his theological vision of authentic Christian witness. It

55. Ibid.

56. Ellul, *Presence*, x.

57. Ibid., ix.

58. Ibid., 113.

59. Ibid., xi.

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does this against the backdrop of an overarching concern for the church's conformity to the world's ways.

The first chapter, "The Christian in the World," rejects the notion that Christians should disengage from the world by separating themselves into enclaves or living "aloof from" the world. Rather, he upholds the idea that while "the Christian is necessarily *in* the world, he is not *of* it. This means that his thought, his life, and his heart are not controlled by the world and do not depend upon the world, for they belong to another Master."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, the Christian has been "sent into this world by this Master" because "he has a part to play in this world which no one else can possibly fulfill."<sup>61</sup> This part involves a "specific function" to be the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a sheep among wolves. The first two images are drawn from Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount in Matt 5:13–16; the reference to sheep among wolves comes from Jesus' instructions to his disciples in Matt 10:16. The main emphasis is that the Christian is to be a "sign" of the reality of God's action in the world, someone who "reveals to the world the truth about its condition, and witnesses to the salvation of which he is an instrument."<sup>62</sup> Ellul focuses upon the strategic role of laypeople as Christ's representatives, those who are "involved in the life of the world through [their] work and his interests" because they face the acute pressures of the world's ways and values. It is critical to note that Ellul's theological understanding of the "world" is quite negative. The world is fallen, sinful, and hostile to Christians and the gospel, since it is "the domain of the Prince of this world, of Satan."<sup>63</sup> Because the gospel message itself is scandalous to the world, a faithful Christian should expect to be persecuted.

Ellul criticizes any attempts to diminish or escape the strong tension between Christian faith and life in the world and understands the layman as "the channel through which the gospel should reach the world" since he is "the point of contact between the ideologies of the world in which he lives and theology—between economic realities, and the forgiveness of Jesus Christ for those realities."<sup>64</sup> This must involve what Ellul calls an "agonistic" way of life, a life of constant struggle.<sup>65</sup> Faithfulness requires reliance

60. Ellul, *Presence*, 2.

61. *Ibid.*, 2–3.

62. *Ibid.*, 4.

63. *Ibid.*, 9.

64. *Ibid.*, 11.

65. *Ibid.*, 13.

upon the Holy Spirit and prayer, as the Christian seeks to understand the realities of the world “on the spiritual plane” so that he or she can participate fully and effectively in the “preservation of the world” and its social or political life, “by the grace of God.”<sup>66</sup>

The second chapter, “Revolutionary Christianity,” takes up the discussion of “profound change, for a radical transformation of our present civilization” that was the subject of intense debate in the years immediately after World War II. At this point, Ellul begins to offer his analysis of “the constitutive elements of the modern world” as “the primacy of production, the continual growth of the power of the State and the formation of the National State, the autonomous development of technics, etc.”<sup>67</sup> The most important feature is what he calls the “framework” or “essential structure” of modernity, which is to say, the belief that “increasing technical skill will bring men the greatest possible good. Yet all the catastrophes which afflict our epoch are connected with this framework.”<sup>68</sup> A key concern for Ellul is the tendency to “subordinate man to his economic function,” which leads to the “submergence of the ‘person’ in a mass-civilization.”<sup>69</sup> This concern for the dehumanization of life is a pervasive theme of *The Presence of the Kingdom*.

In the face of this dehumanization, the world needs a “revolution” that brings about a new way of life: freedom from the tyranny of these “facts” and this reductionist framework. Ellul says, “If this revolution does not take place, we are done for, and human civilization as a whole is impossible.”<sup>70</sup> Contending that Christianity has a “revolutionary character,” Ellul argues that Christians must be “an inexhaustible revolutionary force in the midst of the world.”<sup>71</sup> He explains that the Christian “belongs to two Cities” and lives in light of the certainty of the return of Jesus Christ to fulfill God’s purposes—he is in the world, but “cannot wholly belong to this world.”<sup>72</sup> Christians live in the midst of tension and opposition since they have “another Master” and also are citizens of God’s kingdom, representing “another order” and “another claim.”<sup>73</sup> Someone who is living by the power of Christ

66. Ellul, *Presence*, 19–20.

67. *Ibid.*, 24.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 25.

70. *Ibid.*, 31.

71. *Ibid.*

72. *Ibid.*, 33.

73. *Ibid.*, 35.

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is “a true revolutionary” who “makes the coming of the Kingdom actual” in everyday life.<sup>74</sup> How? Not naively pretending to “bring in” the kingdom or establishing a paradise, but working to make the world “tolerable,” reducing the opposition between the disorder of the world and God’s will for it, and supremely by proclaiming the good news of salvation.<sup>75</sup> This is what Ellul calls a Christian “style of life,” which is a distinctive way of being in the world on behalf of Christ as salt, light, and a sheep among wolves.

The third chapter of *The Presence of the Kingdom*, “The End and the Means,” expands on his critique of modern civilization, especially what he calls “technics”—which he would later describe more elaborately as “technique” in a series of major books. He states: “The first great fact that emerges from our civilization is that today everything has become ‘means.’ There is no longer an ‘end’; we do not know whither we are going.”<sup>76</sup> His examples are drawn from science and technology, where the values of efficiency and usefulness become dominant. An example is the idea found in the Nazi regime that “anyone who is not useful to the community must be put to death.”<sup>77</sup> Along these lines, he adds: “no one knows where we are going, the aim of life has been forgotten, the end has been left behind. Man has set out at tremendous speed—to go *nowhere*.”<sup>78</sup> The quest for “greater, quicker, more precise” takes over; “success” and “progress” are defined in purely technical ways and extended to all spheres of life. Society is increasingly in the hands of technicians who seek efficient results. These conditions make it “impossible to live one’s faith.”<sup>79</sup> In response, Ellul argues that “for Christians there is no dissociation between the end and the means” because in God’s work, “the end and the means are the same.”<sup>80</sup> In theological terms, the end (the kingdom of God), which will be established at the end of time, is “already present when the divine means (the only, unique, Mediator) is present.”<sup>81</sup> He argues that the idea that means are spiritually and morally neutral is wrong. Instead, “all technical achievements are useless, unless they are controlled, given their right position, and judged by the coming

74. Ellul, *Presence*, 39.

75. *Ibid.*, 35.

76. *Ibid.*, 51.

77. *Ibid.*, 53.

78. *Ibid.*, 56. Italics in original.

79. *Ibid.*, 77.

80. *Ibid.*, 64.

81. *Ibid.*, 65.



Kingdom of God.”<sup>82</sup> Ellul returns to the theme of revolution, arguing that “unless the world can rediscover, by a spiritual revolution, an end whose presence can be perceived even in the secret world of technics, it is lost. Now we may search through all philosophies, but Christianity alone offers a solution.”<sup>83</sup> The means of this spiritual revolution is simply that Christians would *live*, because “life, understood from the point of view of faith, has an extraordinary explosive force.”<sup>84</sup>

Chapter 4, “The Problem of Communication,” deals with the absence of genuine communication and human understanding in the modern world, a theme he would develop in later writings on propaganda. Ellul sees modern society as stubbornly unwilling to reckon with the reality of its condition. He detects a “refusal, unconscious but widespread, to become aware of reality. Man does not want to see himself in the real situation which the world constitutes for him. He refuses to see what it is that really constitutes our world.”<sup>85</sup> He deals with the reductionist results that stem from embracing the notion that “all spheres of intelligence are, in fact, exploited by the technicians.” What others have called “instrumental rationality” supplants contemplation.<sup>86</sup> In response, he calls Christians to particular tasks. “The first duty of a Christian intellectual today is the duty of awareness: that is to say, the duty of understanding the world and oneself, inseparably connected and inseparably condemned, in their reality.”<sup>87</sup> He calls Christians to intentionally restore personal contact with their neighbors, and to think of a specific person rather than an abstracted humanity. But his main point is a summons to action: “What we need is to find the true structure or framework of our modern civilization, though in order to get down to this we may have to do a great deal of difficult and delicate scraping away of extraneous matter. We need to understand this framework as the expression of the spiritual reality of our civilization.”<sup>88</sup> This awareness implies an “engagement (or act of resolute committal),” which is not merely the work of an observer or spectator, but the work of a sign or symbol pointing toward Christ by giving “more direction to the world in the spheres of

82. Ellul, *Presence*, 71.

83. *Ibid.*, 73.

84. *Ibid.*, 77.

85. *Ibid.*, 82.

86. *Ibid.*, 92.

87. *Ibid.*, 98.

88. *Ibid.*, 100.

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politics, social conditions, and many others” so that modern culture might “find a hope which is no illusion.”<sup>89</sup> He concludes: “The work of Christian intellectuals is not done in the abstract: it is effective participation in the preservation of the world, and in the building up of the church.”<sup>90</sup>

This synopsis shows that *The Presence of the Kingdom* anticipates and introduces most of the key themes that preoccupied Ellul throughout his many writings: the need for distinctively Christian engagement in the world; the analysis of the social and spiritual conditions of modern civilization; the nature of transformation or “revolution”; the inexorable dynamics of means, as well as the triumph of “technics” (or technique) with their drive toward efficiency in all sectors of life and their attendant threat of dehumanization; the breakdown of human communication and the eclipse of the genuine search for truth as a result of the ascendancy of technical rationality; and the incomparable and irreplaceable revelation of Jesus Christ as the only source of hope. As we consider Ellul’s thinking on technology, propaganda, the city, political economy, Scripture, and ethics, and as we consider his approach to integrating faith, life, and scholarship, we will see that these themes and threads play an organizing role. These, along with a consistent commitment to the command of Rom 12:2—“do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”—shed much light on Ellul’s work, as we will see in the coming chapters.

89. Ibid., 100, 109. Italics added.

90. Ibid., 112.