Foreword

Readers of Jacques Ellul's magnum opus, *The Technological Society*, can hardly be faulted for concluding that his analysis of modern society is pessimistic and fatalistic. Nothing in society, so it seems, remains unsullied by the totalistic force of technique. But Ellul never intended this book to be understood in isolation from his other writings. In his 1981 essay "On Dialectic," he bemoaned the fact that, "No one is using my studies in correlation with one another." Perhaps it was a tall order for all of his readers, Christian and non-Christian alike, to appreciate the dialectical tension he established between his sociological works and his biblical or theological works. On the one hand, he was unveiling a dark vision of technological totalitarianism that pulls every facet of Western culture (and every person) into its vortex; on the other hand, he was presenting a theological vision where human freedom and responsibility could lead to a hopeful future. What all readers need to see, however, is how Ellul's social analysis was always *answered* by his biblical commentary, not in the sense that there are dogmatic religious answers, but rather in the sense of how divine revelation presents the opposite dialectical pole to technocracy. Indebted to Marx, Kierkegaard, and Barth for their respective dialectical methods, Ellul consistently worked within a framework where opposites do not synthesize but remain in a mid-zone of creative tension where awareness and social change can be stimulated.

It is in this dialectical framework that we can best appreciate the significance of Ellul's *Presence in the Modern World.* With the French edition coming out in 1948, this work can be seen as a blueprint for all of his later books. As Ellul later explained, the chapters grew out of four presentations he gave to a Christian audience in 1946. "I established the very broad plan

for a work that would consist in studying the modern world and the Christian requirement in parallel," he said in 1989. "When I was writing this book, I had the impression that this was the direction that I needed to work in, and that this book could be the introduction to the whole." Likewise, Bernard Rordorf noted in his introduction to the second French edition that "this book announces Ellul's whole future body of work, bearing within itself the seed of that work's choices and developments." That seed, according to Rordorf, is Ellul's intentional duality, which "is the key for understanding Ellul's entire body of work." Even the original title (*Presence in the Modern World*) evokes the tension of this dialectic between spiritual and material realms.

Rejecting both Christian escapism from society and Christian collusion with society, Ellul set out to develop how Christians are to be *present* in a world with a style that is truly revolutionary. He repeatedly pointed out that Christian mission can be truly understood only in its confrontation with society. To do this, though, Ellul soon realized that he had to plumb the depths of modern society. "I needed to devote myself to discerning the foundations, structures, and components of the present 'age,' that is, the twentieth century" (Preface). And thus began the book that you now hold in your hands: Ellul's early sketchbook of social analysis, in conjunction with biblical reflection, which all together would find greater development in his subsequent writings. (Unless otherwise noted, all forthcoming quotes are by Ellul as translated in the chapters of this book.)

How might one who is not a Christian read a book that is wholly structured around the topic of *Christian presence* in the world? To begin with, Ellul's ideas largely grew out of his conversation with non-Christian sources. Without Marx, his extensive reconfiguration of the "End and Means" topic might not have unfolded. Without grappling with fascist or communist methods for manipulating facts, Ellul might not have developed his theories of propaganda that are foreshadowed in the chapter on "Communication." These two chapters, in fact, may serve as better starting points for readers who want to identify Ellul's early articulations of his social critique. While Ellul wrote specifically for the "Christian intellectual," he also wrote indirectly for all intellectuals who view themselves in "the time for awareness." Just as Christians must honestly see themselves "on the level of other human beings, along with them, subject to the same laws, influences, and despair," so those who are not Christians can also "wake

up from this hideous nightmare in which techniques induce the world to slumber" and, according to Ellul, perhaps alter the course of social trends.

But is there anything, for Ellul, in *this* world that can help us to become aware and to become agents of real change? We are back to Ellul's pessimism. Humanity cannot generate its own illumination and remedy, especially in an age where novels such as *Brave New World* are written as prophetic literature about contemporary issues. Since the root problem of our mechanistic world is basically a spiritual one, the answer can only come in the "boundary between the profane and the sacred." Again, the Christian, as prophetic seer, is uniquely called to enter this border land between the dialectical poles of Babel and Christ, to "understand the decisive nature of our era." Awareness has to translate into action, of course, but never action that becomes the master. It is essentially "a matter of 'being' and not 'doing.'" For Ellul, this subversion of all other social agendas (which even Christians are prone to follow) is itself a revolutionary presence that strikes more to the core of technological totalitarianism than any other form of action.

Much of this boils down to the way ethics, for Ellul, is to be guided by a vision of God's future. The Christian mandate is not to save or change the world; it is to be, as Rordorf summarized it, "bearers of the eschaton, . . . bearers of the end that God desires." Being salt, light, and sheep in modern society is perhaps more revolutionary than anyone would suspect. Ellul drove home the point that authentic Christians live "on the margin of this totalitarian society, not by rejecting it outright but by sifting it thoroughly." It is very much in this context that we can see why such a prophet as William Stringfellow was invited to write the foreword for this book in 1967. Fittingly, he wrote that "*The Presence of the Kingdom* is Jacques Ellul's most astonishing book."

Given the exponential growth of technological trends, it may turn out that Christians will reach a place of radical witness only when they collaborate better with those who may not share a Christian faith but do share a commitment to reverse the slow drift of technological oppression. Such partners often have greater insights that can strengthen communities of Christian faith, and a book like this may lead to fruitful conversations for those who jointly want to move from enlightened comprehension to ethical response. Certainly Ellul's lifelong friendship with Bernard Charbonneau, who was not a Christian believer, represents this kind of dialectic partnership that stimulates new thought and subversive action. And if the subtitle

of the original French edition is to be considered (*Présence au monde moderne: Problèmes de la civilisation post-chrétienne*), Christians and non-Christians alike face a crisis that requires all hands on deck. To be sure, this book shines the spotlight on the specific role that prophetic Christians have in this day and age. At the same time, Christians will likely falter in this role if they do not partner well with other co-prophets who equally wish to "give the slip" to modern civilization for the sake of true human freedom.

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