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God’s Time: Kierkegaard, Qohelet, and Ellul’s Reading of Ecclesiastes

In this paper, I look at Jacques Ellul’s relation to and reading of the biblical book of Ecclesiastes. I argue that Ecclesiastes is central to Ellul’s entire theology, and that understanding his *unique* reading of Ecclesiastes clarifies Ellul’s relation to his primary extra-scriptural theological source, the Danish Lutheran thinker Søren Kierkegaard. Specifically, Ellul reads Ecclesiastes through the lens of Kierkegaard, but then turns around and reads Kierkegaard through Ecclesiastes. It is the mix of these two, I argue, which structures Ellul’s approach to *the* definitive category for Ellul’s theological ethics—the present time.

To explore these topics, I will begin by briefly describing Ellul’s longstanding love for Ecclesiastes. Second, I’ll comment on how the present time structures Ellul’s whole work. Third, I’ll show how Ellul reads Ecclesiastes through Kierkegaard, making Ecclesiastes an existential book of ironic anti-philosophy. Fourth, I’ll show how Ellul re-reads Kierkegaard through Ecclesiastes, which alters Kierkegaard’s philosophical approach to time and his ironic use of words. Finally, I suggest that this approach to time informs Ellul’s understanding of the *present time*, the definitive category of his theological ethics.

1. Ellul’s relationship to Ecclesiastes

Ellul’s personal engagement with Ecclesiastes spanned his entire career, and almost his entire life. In a late interview, Ellul said the book was one of his favourites, even at the age of 12 years old.¹ In the opening pages of his 1987 book *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes*, Ellul says his only qualification for writing it, quote, “is that I have read, meditated on, and prayed over Ecclesiastes for more than half of a century. There is probably no other text of the Bible which I have searched so much, from which I have received so much—which has reached me and spoken to me so much. We could say that I am now expressing this dialogue.”² If this claim was published in 1987, his ‘dialogue’ with Ecclesiastes must have begun as early as 1937—one year after the publication of his doctoral work, and thus at the very beginning of his writing career. In fact, it is possible that Ellul began writing *Reason for Being* long before its publication. Several of Ellul’s books were written over a long

¹ Olivier Abel, *Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Ellul, Jean Carbonnier, Pierre Chaunu: Dialogues* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2012), 61.

² Ellul, *Raison d’être*, 11; I have borrowed from Hanks’s translation in *Reason for Being*, 1.

time, such as *The Meaning of the City* and the *Ethics of Freedom*. Since Ellul mentions that he was already doing secondary reading on this book *thirty years* before its publication, and he mentions that for this specific book, he wrote out his thoughts *before* doing the secondary research, it is plausible that he began writing the book in the 50s or even earlier.³

Furthermore, Ecclesiastes informs his theology from beginning to end. References to Ecclesiastes abound in his 1948 *Presence in the Modern World*, in his full introduction to Christian Ethics, 1964's *To Will and To Do*, and his commentary on II Kings, 1966's *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, to name just a few.

Moreover, Ellul had planned this study as the “last word” of his works from the beginning. In *Reason for Being*, Ellul writes:

Some forty years ago, I envisioned that a contemporary meditation on Ecclesiastes could serve as an adequate conclusion to the lifework I was beginning to foresee. It seemed, however, that it could come only at the end of my journey, both intellectual and lived. . . In other words, if *Presence in the Modern World* formed the general introduction to all that I wanted to write, Ecclesiastes will be the last word.⁴

From the very beginning, Ellul valued Ecclesiastes *so much* that his meditations on it form his work's conclusion, his final statement.

This is the first point I would like to make today: If Ellul's whole theological-ethical project is based on biblical revelation (as he claims on the first page of *To Will and To Do*), then clearly, as the book which occupied him the most, Ecclesiastes is crucial to understanding this project.

2. The Present Time in Ellul's Theology

Ellul said he began with *Presence in the Modern World*, and ended with *Reason for Being*. This important statement should affect how we read Ellul's entire corpus. Specifically, the role of *presence* and *the present time* is a central feature of both books. I will briefly highlight how presence structures Ellul's theology in these books.

But let's begin where Ellul began, even before *Presence in the Modern World*. One of his earliest articles lays the foundation for the meaning of *presence*. This unpublished 1936 article, titled *The Dialogue of Sign and Presence*, is an 11-page handwritten manuscript of a dialogue between two characters. It was marked with edits by Ellul's not-yet-wife Yvette. This article discusses presence as a complex three-part relationship: first, a dialogue of *God's* presence and *signs* given to believers. God is *present* in His *signs*, so His signs are always more than just signs. Second, a dialogue between a person's body and their spirit—in other words, between *bodily* and *spiritual* presence, which are inseparable. Third, a back-and-forth dialogue between *space* and *time*. True presence involves all three elements of this dialogue—sign-presence, body-spirit, and space-time. Naturally, Jesus Christ is

³ See *Reason*, 2.

⁴ *Reason*, 3-4; modified, *Raison*, 13. “Last” here is not to be read chronologically—on the same page, he says he will write more if God allows him, but will not finish all he had planned.

the center of this discussion: Christ is God's word (thus a sign of God), God in a fleshly body, and God in our time: in Jesus Christ, God is *present*.

Reading *Presence in the Modern World* in this light, it is clear that this book is precisely an elaboration of Ellul's idea of *presence* in the *modern world* described by his modified Marxist sociology. The triple dialogue from the 1936 article roughly structures the chapters of this 1948 book. Each of the first three chapters roughly corresponds to one element of the triple dialogue. The end of the book puts all three in relation, seeking to rediscover a style of Christian life which could fulfill the conditions for true presence.

Crucially, this introduction to his whole work begins theologically with the New Testament language of 'redeeming the time.' A central move in the first chapter examines verses from Colossians 4 and Ephesians 5 which speak of "redeeming the time." In biblical language, *redemption* means *liberating*, like Christ liberating humanity from their slavery to sin. But what could it mean that *time is enslaved*? This question occupies Ellul for the rest of his career; his sociological work aims to describe time's slavery *today*, so that Christians can set about their divinely ordained task of redeeming it, which he treats in his theological ethics.

So, the present time is at the heart of Ellul's *opening* to his project; what about his conclusion? In *Reason for Being*, Ellul reads Qohelet, the writer of Ecclesiastes, as a thinker whose thought stays within the limits of the present time. For Ellul, Qohelet's central emphasis is on how *time* and *death* prevent human thought from accessing any eternal, absolute knowledge. This is how Ellul reads *vanity*—as the anxiety caused by thinking about the future and the fact that the past is gone. He writes: "The future unforeseeable, the past forgotten, only the present remains."⁵ All we have is the present time, and wisdom consists in knowing this and not going beyond it. Within this present, *God's presence* is quote, "the meaning, the purpose, the origin, and the end of the entire work."⁶ So, Ellul's conclusion too, reads God's presence with us in the present time as the heart of Ecclesiastes—and thus the heart of his closing statement.

This is the second point I want to make today: *presence* opens and closes Ellul's theology. Ecclesiastes, by informing Ellul's present, thus informs his entire thought from beginning to end.

3. Reading Qohelet through Kierkegaard

It is therefore important to understand what is *unique* about Ellul's reading of Ecclesiastes. We cannot do so without diving into Ellul's other primary theological source, the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard.

I agree with Frédéric Rognon that *Reason for Being* is Ellul's most Kierkegaardian book.⁷ We can see many similarities between Ellul's reading of Kierkegaard and his reading of his favourite biblical

⁵ *Reason*, 67; modified, *Raison*, 80-81.

⁶ *Reason*, 22; modified, *Raison*, 32.

⁷ Frédéric Rognon, *Jacques Ellul: Une pensée en dialogue* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2013), 179.

book. A few examples. First, Ellul explicitly reads Qohelet's *vanity* as equivalent to Kierkegaard's *anxiety*.

Second, Ellul thinks Ecclesiastes clearly indicates that it was written by Solomon, but Ellul believes that this is chronologically impossible. Furthermore, 'Qohelet,' which can be translated as 'one who assembles,' is an ironic name for the author of such a solitary book. This irony is read through the lens of Kierkegaard, who wrote many books under pseudonyms. At the end of his work, Kierkegaard clarified that his pseudonymic works should be taken with a grain of salt. In these works, Kierkegaard purposely included philosophical ideas to ironically undermine them. *This* is precisely what Ellul sees in Qohelet: an ironic thinker who includes Greek philosophical ideas to show their impossibility.

I will mention one more *decisive* way that Ellul's reading of Ecclesiastes draws on Kierkegaard. I have said that *presence* is at the heart of Ellul's theology, and his reading of Ecclesiastes. We can also see Ellul's presence as an adaptation on Kierkegaard's major theological theme, that of *contemporaneity with Christ*. Kierkegaard's *Practice in Christianity* insists that to be a Christian is to be contemporary with Christ. Walter Lowrie writes that this theme becomes quote, "an emphatic and persistent theme" for Kierkegaard, who equates contemporaneousness with faith itself.⁸ Describing this contemporaneity, Kierkegaard writes, quote:

It is indeed eighteen hundred years since Jesus Christ walked here on earth, but this is certainly not an event just like other events...No, His presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past, thus does not become more and more distant—that is, if faith is at all to be found upon the earth...But as long as there is a believer, this person...must be just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his contemporaries were.⁹

He later even calls contemporaneity "[his] life's thought."¹⁰

And this brings me to my third point: when Ellul reads Ecclesiastes, he thus reads it in a distinctly Kierkegaardian light. Ellul's emphasis on *God's presence in the present* is his own version of Kierkegaard's *contemporaneity with Christ*. Ellul's two major theological sources meet in the very theme which opens and closes his entire work: the present.

4. Re-Reading Kierkegaard through Qohelet

Not only does Kierkegaard affect Ellul's reading of Qohelet; I will now show that in return, Qohelet alters Ellul's reading of Kierkegaard.

That Ellul is deeply Kierkegaardian is well known. Works by Vernard Eller, Frédéric Rognon, and Sarah Pike Cabral, among others, have admirably substantiated this fact. Jean-Luc Blanc writes,

⁸ Cited in Robert Bretall, *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, 375.

⁹ Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, 9.

¹⁰ Kierkegaard, *The Moment*, 290.

quote, “Ellul, he is Kierkegaard in the twentieth century!”¹¹ However, having acknowledged this strong continuity between the two, their *differences* matter just as much.

Rognon has described Ellul’s reading of Kierkegaard as ‘libertarian,’ acknowledging that Ellul modifies elements of Kierkegaard’s thought. In my estimation, Ellul’s reading of Kierkegaard makes two important changes: first, to Kierkegaard’s *irony*, and second, to Kierkegaard’s conception of time.

First, Ellul changes Kierkegaard’s irony. As mentioned earlier, Kierkegaard’s use of pseudonyms signalled that he did not *directly* mean what he was saying, that the reader should look for irony, wordplay, and indirect communication. By contrast, Ellul uses pseudonyms at times, but still only writes things which he directly means. Ellul is ironic towards himself as an author, but *never* adopts Kierkegaard’s ironic approach towards his own words. Irony towards one’s own speech is the opposite of Qohelet: Ellul reads Ecclesiastes as saying that *everything* is vanity—except the spoken human word.

Second, and more importantly for this paper, Ellul changes Kierkegaard’s philosophical approach to time. Despite his ironic undermining of abstract philosophy, Kierkegaard’s approach to time includes *static, philosophical* elements, even in his non-pseudonymous theological works. According to Flemming Fleinert-Jensen, Kierkegaard’s presence is, quote, “independent of time...in this situation of contemporaneity, times and places do not count, because it is a question of the register of the absolute.”¹² What Fleinert-Jensen describes might be called the dialectic of time and eternity, which relies on a conception of time inherited from Plato. While this gives Kierkegaard strong critical force, it also imports a Greek way of understanding time into Hebrew thought. For Ellul, conceiving ‘the eternal’ in this way goes directly against Qohelet, whose vanity undermines this Greek philosophical approach to time. Qohelet forbids knowing anything outside of time except Jesus Christ, who we know precisely because He entered into time. We know of God *only* what He reveals of Himself *in* time.¹³ Thus, Ellul’s emphases on Qohelet strip Kierkegaard’s time of its philosophical elements, leaving only the existential present.

So, this is my fourth point, Ellul first reads Qohelet through Kierkegaard, which means that Ecclesiastes is a book of ironic anti-philosophy, restricting human thought to the humble limits of the

¹¹ Blanc, “Jacques Ellul et la Dialectique”, 42.

¹² Fleinert-Jensen, *Aujourd’hui—Non pas demain!*, 101.

¹³ Cf. this citation from *Fondement théologique du droit*, 33: “...it is not the same thing to say “Justice existing eternally in itself,” and to say “the Will of God which is justice.”...the first term is essentially static, and is thus the conception of the Greek system. The second term is essentially dynamic. While in effect eternal, the will of God is not immobile—on the contrary, all that Scripture reveals to us in this regard is that we cannot know the will of God outside of Revelation, that is, outside of the act of God, and consequently *hic et nunc*. Thus, the will of God as justice is not a sort of immutable framework where we can arrange our notions. It is no more a sort of principal from which we could deduce a system. It is always an act. ...We can know neither the essence nor the form outside of the present, current act of God, which is judgement. In other terms, there is no justice if there is no judgement. And in corollary, it is in the judgement that we know Justice.”¹³

present. Second, Ellul reads Kierkegaard through Qohelet: this changes the present from a Platonic contrast with eternity to the moment of God's self-revealing.

5. God's Present Time

So, let's combine the points I've made. Ellul's lifelong engagement with Ecclesiastes drives his *biblical* approach to theological ethics. Because Ellul views theological ethics as relating to *God's presence in the present time*, he begins and ends his entire project with a focus on the present. His understanding of presence comes from his mixed readings of Kierkegaard's *contemporaneity with Christ* and Qohelet's emphasis on vanity. Reading both sources through each other changes both, making Qohelet into an ironic anti-philosopher and making Kierkegaard *less* philosophical.

What does this mean for us today?

Today we like to think of time as a commodity. We live by clock-time, in which every 'second' is equal to every other second; time is an empty container which we fill with whatever we want—work, leisure, entertainment, etc. By contrast, in a 1960 essay, Ellul develops a much more theological approach to time. Reading the first verses of Genesis, Ellul views time and space as God's first *creatures*. Calling time a *creature* emphasizes its dependence on its creator. Like the rest of creation, time is thus put under human authority; like other creatures, it can thus be cared for, or abused. Instead of our modern clock time, Ellul draws on Ecclesiastes, seeing that God has made a time for everything, and everything beautiful in its time. Rather than being an empty container, or a commodity, the present time is thus *God's* time; each moment is a temporal gift. Ellul's emphasis on *redeeming* this time reminds us that if it is enslaved, it is partially because we have abused it; part of our participation in Jesus Christ's redeeming work is to find a new way of thinking and talking about time which doesn't enslave or kill it.

It is only in this lived present time that we can encounter God. Remember that Ellul's journey of faith began with quote, an "encounter with God [which] provoked the upheaval of my entire being, beginning with a reordering of my thought. It was necessary to think differently from the moment where God could be near."¹⁴ Ellul's theology is thus a forceful call to endlessly look for the presence of the living God revealed in Jesus Christ, who is at work in the present time just as much as 2,000 years ago. Thank you.

¹⁴ Ellul and Patrick Troude-Chasteney, *A contre-courant : Entretien*, 120.