

## **Ellul and the Ten Commandments:**

### **Keeping Reality Open to Truth<sup>1</sup>**

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The purpose of this paper is not to give a close reading of Ellul's actual use of the Ten Commandments in his work but to show how a certain reading of the Ten Commandments, based on his distinction between truth and reality, expresses different facets of a task which Ellul hoped that Christians and anyone conscious of the vicious cycles of power would take up: to keep reality open to truth. An important component of Ellul's arguments about the autonomy of technique is his belief that fallen human beings have an innate desire to possess reality. Yet he believes that the God revealed in the Bible, who became incarnate in Jesus Christ, promises those in relation with this God that they will not have to bow to this desire and be enclosed by reality but will be able to remain open to truth. Each of the Ten Commandments can be paraphrased in such a way as to express a different aspect of this task and promise. Illuminating as I have found this reading to be, it also raises questions, particularly related to bodies and incarnation, which I discuss at the end of the paper.

### **Truth and Reality**

A distinction between *truth* and *reality* is fundamental to Ellul's thought. The distinction is not merely of different content but of two different "orders," each with its own characteristic mode of transmission and logic and inviting a certain attitude towards the world. Truth has to do with human

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented in Lisbon in 2011 and published as "Truth, Reality, and the Ten Commandments: Not for Theology Alone," in *Jacques Ellul and the Technological Society in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. by Helena M. Jerónimo, José Luís García, and Carl Mitcham (Dordrecht: Springer, 2013).

beings' ultimate destiny and values that have the same ultimate seriousness; reality includes that which can be seen and measured in space, expressed in terms of visualizable abstractions, or appears as given in various spheres of life (such as political or economic realities). Truth is communicated by the word of a committed person and requires time to absorb and debate; reality can be transmitted impersonally as abstract data and grasped immediately. Truth invites a posture of waiting and listening towards the other; reality invites an attitude of grasping at and power over these objects which seem so ready to be manipulated. Attending to truth goes along with allowing for love and freedom in relationships; grasping at reality brooks no opposition, but ends up with the human being enslaved by the reality which he or she supposedly possesses yet is completely dependent upon.<sup>2</sup>

Ellul does not think that all answers to the question of truth are equally legitimate. He believes that the one Truth worthy of the title is the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. Before the Fall, according to Ellul, Truth wholly penetrated reality; after the Fall, we think we can arrogate reality to ourselves, but are cruelly deceived. Between the Fall and the final consummation, only in the incarnation of Jesus Christ has truth completely penetrated reality.<sup>3</sup>

### **“You Shall Not Kill”: Nonviolence vs. the Realm of Necessity**

Ex. 20:13: “You shall not kill.”<sup>4</sup>

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not deny another person's existence or prevent his or her future development as a self-directing agent.

It would not be too far off to equate the “realm of necessity” in Ellul's thought with how reality holds together after the Fall. Before the Fall, Ellul thinks, creatures spontaneously obeyed the will of

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2 The distinction is most fully articulated in Jacques Ellul, *La Parole humiliée* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 9-42, but it appears throughout his work, including Jacques Ellul, “Le Réalisme politique (Problèmes de civilisation III),” *Foi et vie* 45, no. 7 (1947): 698-734; Jacques Ellul, “Christian Faith and Social Reality,” in *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage*, trans. and ed. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 168-180; and Jacques Ellul, *Sans feu ni lieu: signification biblique de la Grande Ville* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1975), 239.

3 Jacques Ellul, *Le Vouloir et le faire: recherches éthiques pour les chrétiens* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1964), 107-110; Ellul, *La parole humiliée*, 89-92, 280.

4 All Scripture quotations except this one are from the New Revised Standard Version. In this case, I have opted to use the reading “kill” from the footnote instead of “murder,” which appears in the main text of the NRSV.

God; after the Fall, various forms of law – physical, moral, civil – are needed to keep creatures from destroying each other out of the naked will to power. These laws neither have the spontaneity of God's love towards creatures (or of creatures towards God before the Fall), nor do they bring the life which only relationship with God can bring. Creatures experience them as external constraints or fates.<sup>5</sup> One seems to be faced with a choice between a pre-ordained destiny within these laws and an earlier death if one violates them. Yet Ellul can also speak of creatures as meeting death because they follow the laws of necessity: because certain kinds of necessity prescribe killing (such as predators' biological needs or civil laws requiring war or capital punishment), and because they contain a law of reciprocity: violence reproduces violence.<sup>6</sup>

“You shall not kill” is thus a commandment rising beyond these necessities. Ellul cites this commandment as marking the boundary between the human and the animals in both theological and sociological works.<sup>7</sup> This paper will not attempt to resolve the exegetical problem of what kinds of killing the Hebrew *ratsach* refers to but focus on how Ellul's expansive definition of violence fits in with keeping reality open to truth. Ellul includes under “violence” not only killing but any trauma, physical or psychic, which inhibits another's future development as a self-directing agent.<sup>8</sup> The posture of nonviolence is thus equivalent to the posture of attending to truth – listening, waiting, love, and freedom; the posture of violence is equivalent to the posture of manipulating reality, and especially of reducing a human being capable of responding to Truth into a mere object of reality to be possessed.

Here one may question whether Ellul's stark distinction between a love that waits and a power that crushes has accounted for all the alternatives. What about grabbing a child's hand away from the fire? Are not some ways of structuring civil law codes more likely to promote the development of citizens as self-directing agents than others? The place of what one might call “benevolent coercion” is a significant problem in Ellul's thought. However, debates over its presence or absence do not concern

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5 Ellul, *Le Vouloir et le faire*, 52-55, 109.

6 Jacques Ellul, *Contre les violents* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1972), 119-120, 124-126, 185.

7 Jacques Ellul, *Trahison de l'occident* ([Paris]: Calmann-Lévy, 1975), 78; Ellul, *Contre les violents*, 185.

8 Ellul, *Contre les violents*, 122-123.

whether reality should be open to truth, but whether Ellul has fully accounted for all the ways in which God is active in the world after the Fall.

### **The Prologue of the Ten Commandments vs. Non-Committal Sociology**

Ex. 20:2: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery."

Ellulian theological paraphrase: The only Truth worthy of trust and obedience is *YHWH*, who created the world, brought the Israelites out of Egypt, became incarnate in Jesus Christ, took upon God's self the world's sins in Christ's crucifixion, and will lead the world to its final consummation. This God gives human beings freedom in history, brings judgment upon human works which do not conform to God's will, destroys powers opposed to God's will in the last judgment, and will have communion with each human being in the New Jerusalem.

Ellulian sociological paraphrase: No Truth, no One Guarantor is promising that you will be able to fulfill any of these preconditions for individual or societal resilience.

One might ask how a law, even a commandment of God, can become the antidote to the laws of necessity. Ellul would answer that it is only in relationship with this God that the commandment functions this way. In a statement that functions as a general theological anthropology in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Ellul says that fearing God and obeying this God's commandments are the sum of what it means to be human (Eccl. 12:13).<sup>9</sup> This is not a servile fear but a relationship with a God who waits for human beings to respond and sometimes gives them what they want even though it was not God's original design.<sup>10</sup> Detached from this God, it is possible for these commandments to take their place in the framework of necessities and for a legalistic religion to focus on reality instead of truth.<sup>11</sup> The Prologue to the commandments is an integral part of all that follow, even those that do not refer to God. Ellul follows Karl Barth in treating the commandments as promises: that those in relation to God will not have to kill, commit adultery, steal, and so forth.<sup>12</sup>

Ellul offers no such guarantee in his sociological work. According to his theological method,

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9 Jacques Ellul, *La Raison d'être: méditation sur l'Écclésiaste* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 277.

10 Ellul, *Sans feu ni lieu*, 30, 91; Jacques Ellul, *L'Apocalypse: architecture en mouvement* ([N.p.]: Desclée, 1975), 236-238.

11 Cf. the misconception of Christianity as a kind of moralism; see Jacques Ellul, *La Subversion du christianisme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984), 84-89.

12 Ellul, *La Parole humiliée*, 68-69.

knowledge of God comes by revelation, not neutral knowledge.<sup>13</sup> In his sociological writings he claims to be explicating the workings of societies in ways that should, in principle, be understandable by all. Testimonies to the living God who may intervene in these workings – even though Ellul believes that God may be silent<sup>14</sup> – belong to theology, not sociology. It is not surprising, then, that in his sociological work there is a preponderance of descriptions of vicious circles, such as how the technical phenomenon drives politics, yet, in turn, the state gives a sanction to the technical phenomenon. Power lustful of reality squeezes out truth and reinforces power.

However, a less prominent side of Ellul's sociological work provides the key to understanding how a “prologue-less” version of the Ten Commandments has relevance beyond his theological work. In a few places he shows signs of what might be called, for lack of a better term, a positive social philosophy or philosophical anthropology: a vision of sustainable life for selves and societies that is not expressed in theological terms. He draws on entropy theory to show that a society needs to have tensions between various groups and opinions within it in order to be resilient enough to meet the challenges it faces; without the capacity to receive new information it will eventually die.<sup>15</sup> He calls for contemplation as part of a the kind of revolution required to counter the obsession with following the course of history and being caught up in the momentum towards an ever more powerful and violent state.<sup>16</sup> He thinks that personality formation is a prerequisite for citizens' responsible participation in public debate<sup>17</sup> and that reason, self-control, and respect for the other are prerequisites for the development of a coherent personality not tossed about by every whim and circumstance.<sup>18</sup> The common denominator of all these prerequisites is openness to dialogue with the other and within various constituents of the self or one's experience, such as reason and passions, continuity and change, and so forth. In terms of the distinction between truth and reality, this vision of sustainable life requires

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13 Ellul, *La Parole humiliée*, 54-56.

14 Jacques Ellul, *Espérance oubliée* ([Paris]: Gallimard, 1972), 112-114.

15 Jacques Ellul, *L'Illusion politique*, 2d ed. (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1977), 292-293.

16 Jacques Ellul, *Autopsie de la révolution* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1969), 334-335.

17 Ellul, *L'Illusion politique*, 325-326.

18 Ellul, *Trahison de l'occident*, 53-61.

openness to truth. The various commandments in the Decalogue can be paraphrased in terms of different aspects of this openness.

### **Keeping Selves and Societies Open to Truth: Trust, Thought, Imagination, and Desire**

Ex. 20:3: “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not trust in reality, even invisible spiritual realities that manifest themselves with wordless power, as if it or they were God/truth.

Ex. 20:4-5: “You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them . . .”

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not reduce truth to reality.

Ex. 20:17: “You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not grasp at reality apart from God/truth.

These three commandments – against worshiping false gods, worshiping graven images, and covetousness – are easily paraphrased in terms of the distinction between truth and reality. It is somewhat arbitrary to label the first as having to do with what one trusts, the second as concerned with what one worships (and how one conceives it), and the last as having to do with what one desires (apart from any formal acts of worship), because trust, identification of what one worships, and desire are not easily separated out. What is important is the tie between covetousness and Ellul's description of how we encounter reality. Ellul thinks that covetousness is the sum of all other sins and that one's attitude towards this commandment expresses one's basic attitude towards God and the world.<sup>19</sup> He also thinks that fallen human beings have in our minds an image of us possessing reality that causes us to want to grasp it for ourselves: in short, to covet. He even describes this image in terms from the story of eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis 3: seeing that the fruit appears attractive, then being drawn to take and eat it.<sup>20</sup> The belief that fallen human beings have this image in our minds ends up functioning as a doctrine of original sin in Ellul's work, even in sociological works where theological terms or arguments are absent. After I have finished deriving all the paraphrases of the commandments, I will

<sup>19</sup> Ellul, *La Parole humiliée*, 112; Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, vol. 2 (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1975), 122.

<sup>20</sup> Ellul, *La Parole humiliée*, 15-17.

show how an innate desire to possess reality is fundamental to understanding the logic of technical autonomy, even in sociological works.

### **Keeping Language Open to Bearing Truth**

Ex. 20:7: “You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name.”

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not use language in an empty way so as to rob it of its capacity to witness to God/bear truth.

Ex. 20:16: “You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not report about another person in such a way as to either reduce the truth of their being to reality or distort the realities about them.

The commandments against improper swearing and false witness can be considered to be about resistance to propaganda and other uses of language that betray the word's distinctive function as truth-bearer. Ellul thought that, contrary to popular belief, propaganda is about changing people's behavior, not their beliefs.<sup>21</sup> Even when couched in the phrases of high-sounding values, it functions in the realm of observable results. It is not concerned with communication between committed persons but with using mechanized methods to shape and move masses. Its use of words as power tools may crowd out quieter, more patient uses of words that encourage witnessing to and listening for truth.<sup>22</sup> Such reductive uses of language thus fuel closed systems in the realm of reality, acting in opposition to healthy tensions within societies and healthy personality formation.

Reportage about other people that reduces the truth about their being to an aspect of their reality is similarly unhealthy for selves and societies. An example is the use of political labels as accusations that enable someone's beliefs and perspectives to be dismissed. Even if the label is an accurate representation of the person's opinions and self-identification, a person is always more than his or her political views. When I first presented a version of this paper seven years ago, this kind of stereotyping did not seem as virulent as it seems now. Besides the ongoing dangers of stereotyping, there is the additional problem of how to maintain discourse across fractured political lines. Two desires seem to

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Propagandes* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1962), 36-38.

<sup>22</sup> Ellul, *La Parole humiliée*, 38-39.

collide: the desire to name and resist evil and injustice, including when they are celebrated by people in power, and the desire to treat people in such a way that they know that they can never be reduced to that evil and injustice, even if they seem to approve it because they support a politician who perpetrates it. Accomplishing both these tasks is a difficult balancing act.

One may ask whether false witness in the realm of reality is as important as false witness in the realm of truth. Ellul does believe that the difference between the orders is such that a wrong answer to the question of truth, which he calls falsehood, is of a different order from an incorrect answer to questions of reality, which he calls inaccuracy. It is possible that someone's testimony about his or her neighbor is about questions of reality, such as where the neighbor was at six in the morning on Friday. But the mere fact that a witness is needed implies that this is not (yet) impersonal information that can be communicated immediately. And the answer may have bearing on the person's character and relationships. Furthermore, some of the poles that need to be balanced in Ellul's vision of healthy individuals and societies, such as continuity and change, include non-human realities. Therefore, false witness about realities cannot be dismissed as irrelevant to the task of keeping realities open to truth.

### **Time, Work, and . . . Property?**

Ex. 20:8-10: "Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work . . ."

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall leave time for God/truth in your life, for your work can never be the truth of your life.

Ex. 20:15: "You shall not steal."

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not arrogate property to yourself as an expression of covetousness, nor shall your institutions absolutize private, collective, or state property so as to obscure property's true end: to provide the requisite continuity for meeting the material challenges of individuals and societies, especially the needs of the poor.

Writing during the Cold War, Ellul sees the competing pro-capitalist and Marxist ideologies of the day as both exalting human work and its results at the expense of values beyond material



prosperity: one more way in which reality is valued over truth.<sup>23</sup> Sociologically, he subscribes to a view of economic history whereby poverty has increased with the availability of paid labor, so he believes that these ideologies cannot even deliver on their promise to free people from poverty.<sup>24</sup> Theologically, Ellul sees no reason to give work ultimate status, because he believes that human beings will be separated from our works at the last judgment, with only some of our works being found worthy of entrance into the new Jerusalem – and we have no way of knowing which ones those are.<sup>25</sup> We should therefore do the work which falls to us without obsessing over its results, casting it upon the waters (cf. Eccl. 11:1) and trusting that it may be of help in some way.<sup>26</sup> The commandment to keep the Sabbath puts work in its place, reminding us that discernment of truth requires time and cannot be reached by our productivity. Labor-saving devices that supposedly buy us time are of no help in this respect if we simply fill our leisure hours with ever more distracting realities.<sup>27</sup>

Ellul's critique of Cold War absolutisms also affects how one may interpret the commandment against stealing in terms of his thought. At first, the commandment seems straightforward: stealing means following through on covetousness, taking possession of something one wants that belongs to another. How can Ellul, who sees covetousness as the basic sin, not also oppose stealing? On the other hand, Ellul recognizes that rules about property and stealing have varied across societies. He sees the absolutization of private or state property as a distortion of legitimate ends of property: to provide for the security of the individual's living space<sup>28</sup> and to be used for the meeting of society's material challenges, especially the needs of the poor.<sup>29</sup> Since these needs, concerning human beings as they do, cannot be exhaustively defined in terms of reality (cf. the injunction against reducing the truth about someone else's being to reality), institutional absolutization of a particular way of assigning property

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23 Jacques Ellul, *L'Homme et l'argent (Nova et Vetera)* (Neuchâtel, Switzerland: Delachaux & Niestlé, 1954), 8-24.

24 Jacques Ellul, "From the Bible to a History of Non-Work," *Cross Currents* 35(1) Spring 1985:45.

25 Jacques Ellul, *Ce que je crois* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1987), 284.

26 Ellul, *La Raison d'être*, 101.

27 Cf. the characterization of those numbed by technical work and leisure styles as a new proletariat: Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution: l'inéluctable prolétariat* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982), 210.

28 Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté*, vol. 3, *Les Combats de la liberté* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1984), 322.

29 Ellul, *L'Homme et l'argent*, 60.

fails to keep reality open to truth. Moreover, Ellul sees that ideologies about property often fit into systems of self-justification: people assume that institutional changes will solve society's problems and rest content when they have acted towards that aim, failing to recognize their own complicity in evil or the continuing need to be open to truth.<sup>30</sup>

### **Honoring Face-to-Face Relationships and Resisting Objectification of the Body**

Ex. 20:12: "Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you."

Ellulian paraphrase: Honor your mother and your father, that the conditions for genuine dialogue between persons capable of responding to God/truth can be sustained.

Ex. 20:14: "You shall not commit adultery."

Ellulian paraphrase: You shall not engage in sex outside of marriage, because it inhibits the development of relationships where people can see the other as a person worthy of dialogue and not an object.

Ellul has a positive view of the family throughout his work, seeing it as functioning to keep people together in enduring face-to-face relationships.<sup>31</sup> Honoring one's father and mother can be seen as the positive complement of the commandment not to do violence: do not merely avoid damaging others, but listen to those who brought you forth – those whom you did not choose – that you may learn to listen for truth. Have patience with and care for your aging parents and ill spouse in their physical weakness, that you may learn that love is more important than physical results.

Ellul sees the pledged word in marriage as significant.<sup>32</sup> The spouses promise to care for each other regardless of changing realities (again, keeping reality open to truth). For this reason I have given the Ellulian paraphrase of the commandment against adultery an expansive reading, including fornication as well as adultery. It is not to be supposed that unmarried couples or even people in adulterous relationships are prevented from having conversations about truth by the irregularity of their sexual union, nor that the promises of marriage guarantee a non-abusive relationship. Rather, it is that

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30 Ellul, *L'Homme et l'argent*, 8-24.

31 Ellul, *Ce que je crois*, 101-111.

32 Jacques Ellul, "La Bible est un livre de questions: n'y cherchons point de réponses," in *La Famille contre les pouvoirs: de Louis XIV à Mitterrand*, ed. Pierre-Patrick Kaltenbach (Paris: Nouvelle Cité, 1985), 196-197.

in marriage – by contrast with institutions such as money and the state, which Ellul sees as based on impersonal abstractions and reinforcing vicious circles of power squeezing out truth – a promise is made that goes beyond existing circumstances or sexual desire.

### **Covetousness and the Logic of Technical Autonomy**

A significant part of Ellul's logic about technical autonomy depends on his belief that mathematics yields unequivocal results. For instance, in *The Technological Society*, he says:

There is not a choice, strictly speaking, with respect to size, between, say, 3 and 4. Four is greater than three. This does not depend on anyone. No one can change it or say the contrary or personally escape it. Decision, as regards technique, is actually of the same order. There is no choice between two technical methods. One of them imposes itself inevitably, because its results are counted, measured, seen, and indisputable.<sup>33</sup>

Yet consider the equation  $x^2 - 7x + 12 = 0$ . Its solutions are three and four. How will we obtain the one solution which Ellul expects? We need another statement of mathematical properties – such as Ellul's above, that four is greater than three – or a concrete application, such as the desired consistency of a batch of cookies, where the choice between three and four measures of flour can make a big difference. But why choose? Why not let three and four coexist, like musicians playing polyrhythms?

The introduction of deciding criteria between multiple results of a mathematical calculation requires a will to exclusiveness going beyond the first problem and its solutions. Ellul's logic makes sense if one assumes that most people seek this kind of unambiguity when encountering an impersonal, non-dialectical entity. There is nothing sacred about a single mathematical point as defining the exclusive answer; what matters is that the answer is defined, fixed, and therefore controllable. This kind of reaction towards mathematical solutions is a subset of the will to grasp reality – in theological terms, covetousness – that Ellul believes is inherent in fallen human beings.

Seen in this way, technical autonomy, as Ellul describes it, looks like an expression of original sin. Its consequence is the death of what is distinctively human, just as “the wages of sin is death”

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33 Jacques Ellul, *La Technique ou l'enjeu du siècle* (Paris: Librairie Armand Colin, 1954), 75.

(Rom. 6:23). Not mathematical results but our will to control them forestalls waiting for questions from the realm of truth. We see calculative power as inviting our mastery but end up being its slave. Ellul's belief that technical autonomy arose with such virulence only in the last few centuries does not contradict the pervasiveness and universality of original sin. Where more sacral constraints existed around the use of mathematical knowledge, the tendency to grasp at reality apart from truth would have expressed itself in different ways.

### **So What Do We Do with This Reading? The Challenges of Incarnation and Institutions**

If you've been reordering the commandments in your head, you can see how they fit together. Thou shalt trust in the living God, rather than any finite reality or given necessity; thou shalt not reduce God to reality; etc. God promises that we will be able to do these things, but sociology does not. However, there's an extremely important area of life that I believe Ellul's distinction between truth and reality has trouble with: embodiment. I don't think that Ellul wished at all to denigrate the body or reduce Christianity to spiritual states. However, the distinction between the word that frees and power that crushes leaves little room for a middle term. Ellul's call for Christians to eschew power runs into incoherence if one tries to eschew every kind of power. We are embodied; therefore by gravity we exert some kind of power. The call to keep reality open to truth would also include the call to incarnate truth in our bodies, not that – in Ellul's thought or that of orthodox Trinitarian Christians more generally – we incarnate truth in the same way that Jesus Christ does. How do we incarnate truthful power in our bodies in an age where bodies – of women, of refugees, of black and brown people, of sexual minorities – are disrespected and disempowered?

A similar challenge exists in the area of institutions. Ellul believed that power was the problem in his day and that institutions depending on abstractions threatened to over-classify and overrule the word of a committed person. He opted for anarchy based on this diagnosis of the situation, believing that Calvin had opposed anarchy in his day because institutions were weak. The situation now is not so

clear. On one hand, technical means to do violence or survey our behavior or tastes have only increased. On the other hand, our institutions – speaking particularly of governmental institutions in the U.S. and international relations among Western countries – may not be as strong as they were and are openly disrespected by some in power. Without wishing to deny the dubious results of U.S. military intervention in recent decades and the dubious sustainability of a consumerist way of life, we need to ask if it makes a difference that the U.S. administration proclaims “winning” as the ultimate value instead of human rights or lifting people out of poverty, or if it can be trusted to keep its word at all. Ellul's call for Christians to keep people in power open to truth by “dialogue with the sovereign” presumes that the sovereign at times articulates values that people can use to call the sovereign to account. When the sovereigns in our institutions exercise such power but no longer articulate values, the question becomes urgent of how to inhabit institutions so that in that domain, too, reality is kept open to truth.