

The sense of incarnation in Ellul and Charbonneau¹

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In this presentation I shall try to clarify the common existential and spiritual background of Ellul's and Charbonneau's critique of technological society. They met very young, became friends in their twenties, and their intellectual companionship lasted throughout their life. Ellul, as most of you already know, kept saying that he had an important intellectual debt towards Charbonneau. Although he was not a Christian, I think it is useful to take into account Charbonneau's thought, because it sheds some light on the orientations of Ellul's thought. The agnostic Charbonneau and the Christian Ellul had in common a same understanding of human freedom as incarnation. Ellul wrote for example that already in the thirties they "insisted on the unity of the human being, on the incarnation, on one's commitment according to a personal decision²". Their common dissent with the evolution of modern society is rooted in this common spiritual experience. When they were young they had long discussions on this issue and understanding what one says about this issue helps understanding what the other has to say.

On this fundamental issue of freedom as incarnation, the social writings of Ellul say very little. True, we can get some hints from his theological writings. But those hints are not always very explicit. For example in *Presence of the kingdom* he makes a connection between the issue of incarnation and the criticism of modern technology and of the modern State, but this connection is not very explicit.

I shall try here to make it more explicit and in order to do so, I must begin with a few remarks on the Judeo- Christian roots of incarnation.

I Two models of perfection.

Free like a bird : In most religions, perfection or sanctity can be achieved through a process of disincarnation. Achieving immortality, Getting rid of the individual body and its carnal needs, liberating the soul from gravity, flying etc. Most mysticisms aim at liberating the self from his condition of a living body. This self-deification by means of disincarnation is also the goal of many speculative philosophies. Thanks to the power of the concept, man's mind can liberate himself from his finiteness, which he experiences in his body. (The soma = sema theme of the ancient Gnostics exemplifies this trend). This longing for the post-human, or the trans-human is also one of the powerful motives of the technological adventure.

Reaching a perfect state, obtaining freedom, is overcoming the bonds which attach the human mind to the laws of corporeal nature. Hence, the importance of ascensional symbolisms and of transparency in representations of human perfection.

¹ A first version of this paper was presented at the 2014 IJES Ottawa conference.

² Ellul, Jacques : « Introduction à la pensée de Bernard Charbonneau » in revue *Ouvertures, Cahiers du Sud-Ouest*, n° 7, 1985, p 41.

This state of mind may encourage a fascination for technological power and an interpretation of every progress of human power over nature as one more step towards the ultimate liberation of the human mind from the constraints of corporeal mode of existence which is experienced as an obstacle.

On earth as in heavens : judeo-Christian revelation breaks with this aspiration towards a disincarnate perfection. To mankind, obsessed with the desire for escaping from its condition (“you will be like gods...”), the god of the bible gives the example of an unheard of and scandalous perfection by means of his incarnation in the world. “The word became flesh”, says the Bible.

This *Ensarkosis logou*, incarnation of the word, lends itself to various interpretations. A sacrificial one would say that the sufferings which Jesus suffered in his flesh are the price for the salvation of mankind. Another one would say that this incarnation does not amount to a diminishing of God but to the manifestation of a supreme perfection. Becoming sentient flesh, individual incarnated existence, active in space and time, the verb gives mankind the model of a perfection in this world. Before Christ, human could believe that perfection, which realizes all the aspirations of the spirit, could exist only beyond the natural world. Now, Jesus, the god made human, gives the example of the full realization of the spirit in this world.

The example of Christ tells us that sanctity is no longer in a flight from this world nor in the rejection of our carnal condition, but in the act of incarnation. This is the new model set for human freedom. And since this imperative of incarnation knows no limits, it is no longer during some special moments of their spiritual life that humans should realize this incarnation. From now on, invested with the “freedom of God’s children”, they must try to translate or put into practice their spiritual values in all the dimensions of their life, daily life included, which becomes sanctified. Therefore the value of human works should be evaluated and judged by taking into account the experience of all the dimensions, including the carnal ones, of this daily life.

II Technique and Incarnation in Jacques Ellul.

In presence of the kingdom, Ellul explains what should be a Christian ethics in a world dominated by technology. And right at the beginning of this book he raises the issue of incarnation “God has been incarnated, and we should not disincarnate him”³. Therefore, it is important for each believer not to his separate material (carnal) condition from his spiritual situation. Our responsibility is to incarnate our spiritual values in this world “from which we should escape”⁴. According to this imperative of incarnation we should build “a civilization At human scale”. But our technological civilization is not adapted to “carnal man” (*l’homme de chair*).

The accelerated growth of our technical, economical and scientific means is grounded in a process of abstraction which neglects real man and considers only an ideal man.

³ Ellul, Jacques *Présence au monde moderne*. Genève, Roulet 1948 ; p. 16

⁴ Op. cit. p.19.

“Thus, living and real man is subordinated to the means which should guarantee the happiness of an abstract man. The man of philosophers and politicians, which does not exist, is the only goal of this prodigious adventure which results in the misery of the man of flesh and blood, and transforms it everywhere into a mean.”⁵. If we seriously pay attention to the real condition of man of flesh, we should not accept this dissociation.

The Bible and our bodily condition according to Ellul.

That incarnation should be at the core of Christian life, was strongly stated as early as 1948 in *Presence in the Modern world*. In order to explain in more details how Ellul’s understanding of the value of bodily aspect of human existence is inspired by the Bible, I shall dwell on two lectures, delivered by Ellul in 1992. Together with some articles and the transcripts of several biblical studies, ranging from 1974 to 1992, these two lectures were recently published under the title “*Mort et espérance de la résurrection*” (Death and hope for resurrection”)⁶.

In those two lectures Ellul insists on the essential character of the corporeal dimension of the human mode of existence. Therefore, everything which impinges on the material dimensions of our mode of existence and of our way of life is essential. Since what Ellul has to say is very clear, I shall mostly quote his writings. I apologize for the clumsy translation.

NOTA : I am not a specialist of Ellul’s theology and I have not studied several of his theological writings. Therefore it is quite possible that Ellul has dealt with this issue at more length in other works which I ignore.

1. In the lecture “Resurrection, myth or reality?” of November 1992, Ellul deals with the biblical status of the body, understood in the light of Jesus’ resurrection.

Ellul’s thesis : the body has an eminent dignity since it is the body which is resurrected.

p.19 “Thus, resurrection is not only a spiritual event, it is a thoroughly material event, which allows (Thomas and others)to see the resurrected. It is, I believe, essential to outline the materiality (of resurrection) since God incarnated himself in a human body. This is very material and there is no spiritualism in the Bible; It is always very concrete. And the Bible gives also a huge importance (which is not sufficiently mentioned), to the body.: the human body is very important. For example just think of this important text from Saint Paul, who says (I Cor. ;15, 53-54) : “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality.”⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality...”⁷, all this is about the body. This is quite striking, since resurrection does not occur to the soul, or to a spirit. No. It is the resurrection of the bodies, of bodies which have changed, bodies which now are spirituals, but which are bodies. The gospel insist on this materiality and the resurrection is, as I said, resurrection of the bodies.”

Further on Ellul explains that this eminent dignity of the body results from the fact that (according to the Bible) in man’s mode of existence there is nothing superior to the body: Spirit, soul and body are a whole and cannot be separated.

⁵ Op. cit. p.83

⁶ Ellul, Jacques : *Mort et espérance de la résurrection*. Olivétan, Lyon, 2016

⁷Ellul use an unusual translation (perhaps his own) into French : « lorsque ce corps mortel aura revêtu l’immortalité, lorsque ce corps animal sera devenu un corps spirituel, lorsque ce corps infirme sera revêtu de force » (I cor ;15, 53-54).

2. From a previous lecture “Reincarnation, transmigration of the soul or resurrection”

of April 21 1992, Ellul had already stated that the idea of a soul, of a spiritual principal, distinct and transcendent to the body is not in conformity with the teachings of the Bible.

Ellul’s thesis: the idea of soul which subsists after the death of the body, is not a Biblical idea.

p.25 “The soul, such as it has been understood in Christendom for centuries, at least since the Middle ages, the soul which has a character of immortality, is a notion which is absolutely not biblical.[...] It is a Greek notion. And our idea of immortality of the soul comes from Plato and Greek philosophers.” *” In the Old testament the heart⁸ plays more or less the role which was given to the soul by medieval theology. The heart is an inner and hidden organ and from him flow the sources of life, of the human being. it is the heart which can receive the Spirit. In Hebrew, the heart designates also consciousness, the deepest part of personality, and also the intelligence, an intelligence endowed with a remarkable character : essentially it is the intelligence of good and evil.”*

P27: “Jewish thought does not have, absolutely, the idea of an immortal soul. When man dies, well, he dies entirely. And, in the same way, in the Old testament there is no reference to the immortality of the soul. [...] Put in a different way, it is the whole of man which dies and is resurrected; body and soul.”

p.27 “Therefore, it is a body which is resurrected with, so to speak, everything which surrounds it, which is living in this body, and it is the heart which replaces our idea of the soul. And all the texts of the ancient testament bear the stamp of this totality of death, and beyond death, if there is no resurrection, there is nothing.”

p.28 : “In other words, various elements of this Greek philosophy were incorporated in Christianity, without realizing the utter contradiction between this Greek thought and the Christian revelation. There is contradiction because if the soul is immortal, what is the meaning of resurrection? It would be only the resurrection of the body and not of the being. But resurrection is, indeed, resurrection of the whole, it is not the body which returns to the soul, it is the totality, body and soul, which is resurrected.”

And again:

p.29: “The soul has not a life independent of the body, the soul is not a supplement”.

p.30 “The soul has no independent life”.

Conclusion: everything which affects the body and our sensibility is of the utmost spiritual importance.

The incarnation of the verb in Christ gives mankind a model : in order to be good, an action must incorporate its end not only in its effects but also in the agent and the means he uses.

An efficient action realized by someone who does not know what he does and why, who is reduced to the status of mere irresponsible mean, cannot be good. “What is important is not our tools and institutions, but ourselves...”⁹. Only a process of disincarnation can allow us to imagine that an action could be justified by its end. All our actions , and all their effects should embody our values.

This is not very original. Others have held the same ideas, but what is original with Ellul is his willingness (and ability) to take seriously and radically these principles for identifying and

⁸ (therefore a perishable organ)

⁹ Op. cit. p.105

evaluating the instances of depersonalization of daily life. Here is the basis of his criticism of modern State and of technical civilization. He shows us how the real workings of the technical and institutional equipment of mankind tends towards autonomy, which is contradictory with the principle of the unity of means and ends associated with incarnation.

Thus, the emphasis on incarnation in Christ as well as in the life of real individual man, which is at the core of Christianity, requires us to submit our techniques and our institutions to an evaluation (*judgement*) which determines their place in our lives as well as their limits.

Ellul insists on three consequences of this imperative of incarnation :

First: This imperative of incarnation should be obeyed in all the dimensions of our lives. For example, concerning power relationships, we should pay attention not only to politically institutionalized forms of domination, but to non political forms of domination. This requires that we pay a careful attention to the structures of daily life in order to identify hidden power relationships.

Second: Personal autonomy is both the condition and the realization of freedom. Only through the responsible action of each of us can the word of God incarnate itself in the world. Every-one, each of us, is called to act and to decide personally in a world which depersonalizes action. Everything which reduces our personal control on our daily life is bad.

Third: Our spiritual and moral orientations must be put into action first in our daily life and express themselves through our way of life (*style de vie*). For changing the world, private life is as important as public and political action.

3. Freedom and incarnation in Bernard Charbonneau

Throughout his entire life Charbonneau was motivated by the idea that industrial civilization cannot answer two human needs: The need of nature and the need of personal action, or-said otherwise – the need of freedom. Hence, his works can be read as an invitation to inventing a new civilization which could respond to these needs of nature and freedom.

Because incarnation is a central feature of human condition, the incapacity of our civilization to respond to these needs results in the depersonalizing of existence. In one of his books he writes that “the uncontrolled development threatens this man whose mind is incarnated in a body”¹⁰

First, let me say a few words in order to explain why Charbonneau thinks that incarnation is a central dimension of human existence.

For him, to be free is to accept - and not to reject - the tension between a spiritual imperative and the difficulties to incarnate it in nature as well as in society. Only an individual can realize this incarnation in his life. “Between heaven and Earth, between the Ideal and the real, a

¹⁰ Charbonneau, Bernard : *Le système et le chaos*.. Economica, Paris 1990. 290p. p.128

mediator is necessary, and there is none for that, but a man; in order to achieve its incarnation, the Spirit never used another device.”¹¹. Although he was not a believer, Charbonneau several times quotes this passage of the Scripture where Jesus says ““Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them *into practice* is like *a wise man who built his house on the rock*”. (Matthew 7:24-27). And Charbonneau insists what is important here is the effort to put the spiritual truths into practice, whether we succeed or not.

Accordingly, the dream of a total freedom is meaningless, since freedom cannot be a permanent mode of existing; it consists in an *effort for liberation* which succeeds more or less. Charbonneau said again and again that a thought which is not put into practice in daily life is worthless, and – as a consequence – that every dimension of the individual’s experience is important, since every circumstance of daily life is an occasion for putting our values into practice.

Besides, Charbonneau is convinced that thought has a vital need of expressing itself through an action which gives it in return material reality and ontological weight. Since he is especially aware of the global completeness of the person, he is reluctant at giving more importance to certain material dimensions of life over the others.

For example In order to evaluate the productive equipment of a society we should take into account not only the level of consumption but also the sensuous (or sensorial) conditions of daily life.

Whether we consider the progress of institutional organization or the progress of technological and industrial performances, beyond a certain threshold the growth of our tools may deprive all the individuals of the possibility of incarnating their values through actual actions. Meditating over the fantastic increase of the power of mankind’s tool, and especially of the State, he says : “From my own thinking to this reality, the distance is such that I am condemned to a disincarnated thought, when thinking the State can be animated by an all powerfull imperative of incarnation.”¹²

United by a common thought.

This is the title of an article which Charbonneau wrote for an environmentalist journal after Ellul’s death. Reflecting on their personalist youth and their split with the Esprit Movement initiated by Emmanuel Mounier Charbonneau wrote that unlike Mounier “we were not interested in saying “amen” to progress, but in understanding the threat which it posed to nature and freedom [...] Where for Mounier it was necessary to adapt to a society in transformation, for us it was necessary to judge it according to our values of democracy and freedom in order to change it.”¹³.

In the *personalist manifesto*¹⁴, written in 1937 by both Ellul and Charbonneau, they criticize the depersonalization of action which, in modern society, result from the normal working of

¹¹ Charbonneau, Bernard: *Je Fus Opales*, Bordeaux 2000 ; 235p. p.21

¹² op. cit. p.10

¹³ Charbonneau, Bernard. « Unis par une pensée commune », in *Combat-Nature* n°107 ; novembre 1994

¹⁴ Charbonneau, Bernard et Ellul, Jacques *Directives pour un manifeste personaliste*. Journal intérieur des groupes personalistes du Sud Ouest, 1935 ou 1936. Patrick Troude-Chastenet en a publié une édition annotée dans le *Revue française d’Histoire des Idées Politiques*, n° 9. Paris,1999. p.159-177.

administrative, economic and technical institutions. They call for an evaluation of institutions and technologies, not from the point of view of efficiency but rather according to their consequences for each of us' mastery of our own daily life. Which place is left in the technological society to our own decisions? For them the reduction of our control over our daily life is evil.

Reflecting on their early common commitments Jacques Ellul wrote that "We felt the necessity of proclaiming certain values and of incarnating certain forces". But "when the personal problem consisted in examining if we could incarnate the necessity which we felt inside of us", in the normal social life, the question was no longer "to live according to one's thinking", but simply "to think and nothing else and to make a living and nothing else"¹⁵.

Thus, it is their sense of incarnation which led these two young thinkers to undertake a radical critique of a civilization which creates such a dramatic split between the spiritual and material dimensions of life.

¹⁵ Ellul, Jacques : « Introduction à la pensée de Bernard Charbonneau » in revue *Ouvertures, Cahiers du Sud-Ouest*, n° 7, 1985, p 41.