"*Technical Theology*: Francisco de Vitoria and the Violence of Efficient Conversion"

Elijah Byrd Deyton

ebyrddeyton@gmail.com

In the wake of the European conquest of the Americas, there was much distortion and destruction. Theologians, ecclesial leadership, and lay members of Christendom all had various conflicting interests that led to the many atrocities committed in the name of Christianity. In the following remarks, I will discuss a reply to the conditions of colonized Indigenous Americans by a leading 16th-century Spanish theologian, Francisco de Vitoria, and analyze how this response contributed to a notion of technical efficiency that derailed the mission of Christian discipleship and reoriented it towards the destruction and disfigurement of the non-Christian other. I hope investigating and engaging in this work will advance a conversation about the illness of efficiency that has historically penetrated the very heart of the Christian mission in the modern period, as well as introduce the insights of Jacques Ellul to a new audience, namely, my contemporaries who are interested in the critique of colonial epistemology, and the 'theological turn' in French phenomenology.

To begin, we must take a moment to introduce Francisco de Vitoria. Vitoria, "a leading [16th century] theologian at Spain's Salamanca University, drew up moral guidelines for respecting the property, lives, and souls of the Indigenous Americans that helped establish principles of modern international relations."[1] Vitoria arose as a prominent voice of check and balance amongst the greed of the colonial empire, that is as long as Indigenous peoples remained outside of the jurisdiction of the sovereign. Even a voice with the best intentions can inspire ill-formed desires. In *On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,* Vitoria unpacks his response to the question of forceful conversion. Vitoria states:

> I REPLY by asserting, first, that to compel those who are subjects [of the state or sovereign] is not intrinsically evil, like perjuring an oath; that is, it is not so evil that it cannot sometimes be a good deed. "It is evil," as Saint Thomas says, "but not so evil that

---

[1] Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 209.

it can never be good"; the proof being that it is not by definition so evil as to involve an inevitable breach of charity to God or one's neighbor. It is not contrary to God's interest; it is clearly a great advancement of the Christian religion. Nor is it against our neighbor's interest, since it is to his benefit.[2]

In this response we see Vitoria compromising the Christian mission to make and grow, with and alongside, disciples, not converts, for a gospel that caters to the efficient drive to control, comprehend, and direct the other's belief.

Stemming from the above quote, one line, in particular, haunts me; "it is not so evil that it cannot sometimes be a good deed."[3] This moral point is characteristic of what Jacques Ellul calls *la technique;* this term encapsulates a lot for Ellul, but the core of *technical thinking* is its necessary drive towards "absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity."[4] In short, this manifests as the treatment of the other person, of the environment, or, even of myself, becoming subject to the mission at hand. The Christian theologians of Vitoria's day promulgated this *technical theology* by turning to efficiency and mass production as standards for conversion procedure to secure souls for both the Christian faith and the colonial empire.

Pursuing this point further, the results of conversion by coercion are quite literally the opposite of Vitoria's attempted paternalism. Vitoria states, "Nor is it against our neighbor's interest, since it is to his benefit."[5] This line of thinking matches exactly with Emmanuel Levinas's diagnosis of the ills of Western thought. In this way of thinking, "Individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them... The meaning of individuals… is derived

---

[2] Kenneth Mills, William B. Taylor, Francisco de Vitoria, and Sarah Lauderdale Graham, "Francisco De Vitoria 'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,' Salamanca, Spain," in *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History*, (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2002), 72.

[3] Vitoria, "'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,' Salamanca, Spain," 72.

[4] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, xxv-xxvi.

[5] Vitoria, "'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,' Salamanca, Spain," 72.

from the totality. The unicity of each present is incessantly sacrificed to a future appealed to to bring forth its objective meaning."[6] From this insight, we can see exactly what Vitoria is falling prey to; what "benefits" the other is what I deem to "benefit" myself, especially as I look toward the future, but by doing this I disregard what "is to his benefit" on the other's own terms.[7] Why do this? Because the drive to efficiency—the mass conversion of all nonbelievers on legal and moral grounds—forces me to quickly grasp at and totalize the other for the sake of comprehension, malleability, and ultimately complete submission to my own, or my own acknowledged, authority.

In her monograph, *The Touch of Transcendence*, theologian Mayra Rivera renders this same point in another cultural and temporal location when she recounts: "In the context of the Protestant missions that accompanied (and coincided with) the U.S. invasion and occupation of Puerto Rico in 1898, a missionary writes the following directive: 'To *know the mind of God* is the first requisite of the missionary, but next to that he must come to the *knowledge of the mind of the people* over whom he shall be placed by the Holy Spirit…' Knowledge here is an attempt to grasp, to comprehend, to gain control over people."[8] In striving for this efficient control, rooted in *la technique*, one necessarily constructs abstract knowledge, which directs a conforming violence at the other and ultimately disfigures their very appearing. This disfigurement is the very annihilation of the potential for discipleship and relationality, and the undoing of what the Gospel claims of the Kingdom of God. Conversion then, in *technical theology*, only serves as a political identifier or a forced cultural narrative constructed upon

---

[6] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. by Alphonso Lingis, (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013), 21-22.

[7] Vitoria, "'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,' Salamanca, Spain," 72.

[8] Mayra Rivera, *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 10.

totalizing knowledge for the converted and the oppressor alike—an empty, impotent rendering of the Gospel to say the least of the matter.

This colonial epistemology takes technical shape in many forms, but for the sake of casting this notion in a more tangible conceptual rendering, I will propose a model concerned with the technique of *statistics*. Vitoria states above that the pursuit of coercive conversion, "is not contrary to God's interest; it is clearly a great advancement of the Christian religion."[9] Techniques require sustenance to thrive, and Vitoria's proffering of the notion of *advancement* introduces our ill-conceived technique to its proper feeding ground: to determine progress and conformity to a criterion of measurement there must be a method of data procurement and assessment; a means of differentiating between the insider and the outsider, myself and the rejected other, or, of course, my victorious cause and those that are ignorantly or consciously aware of their existence as opposition. This method is *statistics*. *Statistics* are, as Ellul defined them in *The Technological Society*, "the instrumentalities for determining raw facts…"[10] While I agree and take up this literal definition, we will expand *statistics* here to also signify an attitude one adopts in perceiving the world around them by allowing oneself to be fundamentally shaped by these instrumentalities. This attitude I suggest is not unlike David Lovekin's reading of *technique* as a form of intending; Lovekin writes, "many readers…fail to understand technology, *la technique*, as a form of consciousness, but precisely this thesis is the central concern of *The Technological Society*."[11]

When this *statistical attitude* is present, individuals, communities, and whole societies end up constructing and disseminating the totalizing knowledge that Mayra Rivera identifies

---

[9] Vitoria, "'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,' Salamanca, Spain," 72.

[10] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 163.

[11] David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022), 16.

above. This totalizing knowledge engenders a vicious and brutal myth that has haunted us moderns for some time now; Ellul describes it thusly: "The technicians' myth is simply *Man*— not you or I, but an abstract entity. The technician intones: 'We strive for Man's happiness; we seek to create a man of excellence…"[12] And here, Ellul's condemnation rings true, "the abstraction, Man [in his supposed happiness or excellence], is only an epiphenomenon in the Marxist sense; a natural secretion of technical progress."[13] This myth then, is a false transcendence that enables those who accept it to condense the individual personhood of others into a totalizing abstract state. The philosopher Michel Henry names and decries this same phenomenon: "Men replaced by abstractions… statistically, counted like animals and counting for much less. Men given over to the insensible, become themselves insensible, whose eyes are as empty as a fish's… devoted to false knowledge, reduced to empty shells, to empty heads…"[14] Not only does this serious error justify and engender violence against its unfortunate target, but it also acts as a viral infection, contaminating all those who succumb to the co-option of desire by efficiency, reducing all persons involved to insensibility and spiritual death.

I am reminded here of the contemporary transgressions committed against Indigenous peoples, especially parents and children in Canada, who between the years of 1876-1996 had to constantly confront the fear of being abducted from their homes and put into the state-funded, church-run Indian Residential School system, at which it is estimated nearly 6,000 children died (often being buried in unmarked graves).[15] In a separate but similar case, between the years of 1910-1970, "government officials [in Australia] rounded up children, especially those of mixed

[12] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 390.
[13] Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 390.
[14] Michel Henry, *I Am The Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, trans. by Susan Emanuel, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 275.
[15] Mali Isle Paquin, "Canada Confronts Its Dark History of Abuse in Residential Schools," The Guardian, Guardian News and Media, June 6, 2015.

White and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ethnicity, and sent them to boarding schools and church-run mission[s]… as many as one in three Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families nationwide."[16] I am sure that Vitoria's dearest dictum, "it is not so evil that it cannot sometimes be a good deed" had much influence on the supposed Christian thought that led to these atrocious actions and outcomes.[17] Christian mission, as it has occurred in many contemporary situations, is still founded upon the necessary totalization and abstraction of the other arising from the drive toward efficiency and control. From the argument above, it is clear to see that the predominant Christian interpretation of the directive to make and grow disciples of every nation needs critical reevaluation as we push further into post-modernity. How could a Christian go about this?

The first step, surely, is to begin by listening to voices like Levinas that direct the Christian back towards the letting be other of another's otherness. Another direction may be to return to the word *discipleship*; what does this word mean? Discipleship has something to do with approach, justice, and dignity. In this regard, philosopher Enrique Dussel has an insight to offer: "To approach in justice is always a risk because it is to shorten the distance toward a distinct freedom."[18] *Approach* takes on a new meaning than those of us embedded within a necessity-efficiency-driven culture might expect. This *approach* is the adoption of what Ellul calls *non-power*. According to Ellul, "Non-power means being able and not willing to do it. It is choosing not to exercise domination, efficiency… it is relinquishing power."[19] This *approach*, then, does not mean to come near to the other for the sake of knowledge that engenders control,

---

[16] Rachel Pannett, "Australia to Pay Hundreds of Millions in Reparations to Indigenous 'Stolen Generations,'" The Washington Post, August 5, 2021.

[17] Vitoria, "'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers,' Salamanca, Spain," 72.

[18] Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. by Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 17.

[19] Ellul, *Theology and Technique*, 242.

possession, domination, or exploitation; rather this *approach* is the separation of the same from the other, the turn towards the opening of infinity, away from totality and its disastrous results, results that the Indigenous populations, both prior in history and contemporaneous to us, must strive to overcome.

The philosopher Felix Ó Murchadha expresses this *approach* in terms of Christian agapeic love, stating, "I am not the object of my love in any form, there is no notion of becoming one in love. In love, the other remains other, remains beyond the reach of my love."[20] Ó Murchadha, offering an elucidation of the existential realization of this agapeic love, elsewhere reminds us, "[the proper conception of the movement of agapeic existence] is a movement beyond the practical, beyond the instrumental, toward a being in relation to the other."[21] This agapeic love is an undoing of efficient, technical intentions, which once undone, unfolds and reveals the image and presence of Christ in the simultaneously transcendent and immanent space given by the distance between the particularities of one's self and another.

This is risky, as Dussel realizes because there is vulnerability upon the *approach*; my distinct freedom is limited because I now must submit to the other in response, as Dussel indicates, to greet or injure, to embrace or murder.[22] The other's distinct freedom is limited by their decision in response to the encounter; unlimited freedom—especially as it concerns our potential to totalize and seek efficiency from within the abstract *statistical* attitude—is interrupted and redirected to the particularity of the other for the sake of justice. This is *relationship*. This is *discipleship*. Put another way, Ó Murchadha observes, "Christian life is a

---

[20] Felix Ó Murchadha, "Love of Enemies for a Lover of Wisdom, or, Can a Phenomenologist Be a Philosopher?" in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, edited by Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler (London: SCM Press, 2007), 408.

[21] Ó Murchadha, *A Phenomenology of Christian Life*, 40.

[22] Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation,* 17.

being with existents…[who] are singular responses to a loving call…Such a being with, such a tarrying-with, is… a silent acknowledgment of a shared being called in the agapeic being of creation, a being that subverts all erotic appropriation [read *la technique* manifested here in *statistical attitude*]."[23]   This is the Gospel's directive: to *approach* and *tarry-with* the other in patient justice and to turn one another towards Christ's witness of mercy, righteousness, and dignity all in the name of denying what is efficient; all for the sake of radical love and liberation which only arrives through the denial of *technical* thinking. Ellul captures the most critical form of this denial when he reminds us, "In a world aimed at power by Technique, only the spirit and the behavior of non-power are the critique."[24]

In conclusion, there is no spectrum for evil and goodness, there is no evil deed of transgression that yields a good for another's own benefit, as Vitoria would have us believe. There is only discipling one another in the Gospel, *approaching* and *tarrying-with* one another in honesty, justice, and submission. This is what the efficient theology of Vitoria distorts. *Technical theology* totalizes all entities into the singularity of oblivion.

---

[23] Ó Murchadha, *A Phenomenology of Christian Life*, 175.
[24] Ellul, *Theology and Technique*, 241.

References:

Dussel, Enrique. *Philosophy of Liberation*. Translated by Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

Ellul, Jacques. *Theology and Technique: Toward an Ethic of Non-Power*. Translated by Christian Roy. (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2024).

Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological Society*. Translated by John Wilkinson. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1964).

Henry, Michel. *I Am The Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*. Translated by Susan Emanuel. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

Levinas, Emmanuel. *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. Translated by Alphonso Lingis. (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2013).

Lovekin, David. *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul*. (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022).

Mills, Kenneth, William B. Taylor, and Sarah Lauderdale Graham. "Francisco De Vitoria 'On the Evangelization of Unbelievers," Salamanca, Spain." In *Colonial Latin America: A Documentary History*, 65–77. (Lanham, MD: SR Books, 2002).

Noll, Mark A. *Turning Points: Decisive Moments in the History of Christianity*. 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012).

Ó Murchadha, Felix. *A Phenomenology of Christian Life: Glory and Night*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013).

Ó Murchadha, Felix. "Love of Enemies for a Lover of Wisdom, or, Can a Phenomenologist Be a Philosopher?" in *Transcendence and Phenomenology*, edited by Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler, 404–20. (London: SCM Press, 2007).

Pannett, Rachel. "Australia to Pay Hundreds of Millions in Reparations to Indigenous 'Stolen Generations.'" The Washington Post, August 5, 2021.

Paquin, Mali Isle. "Canada Confronts Its Dark History of Abuse in Residential Schools." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, June 6, 2015.

Rivera, Mayra. *The Touch of Transcendence: A Postcolonial Theology of God*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).