

The **Ellul** Forum

Number 66 Fall 2020



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The **Ellul Forum**

About

Jacques Ellul (1912–94) was a French thinker and writer in many fields: communication, ethics, law and political science, sociology, technology, and biblical and theological studies, among others. The aim of the *Ellul Forum* is to promote awareness and understanding of Ellul's life and work and to encourage a community of dialogue on these subjects. The *Forum* publishes content by and about Jacques Ellul and about themes relevant to his work, from historical, contemporary, or creative perspectives. Content is published in English and French.

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Submissions

The *Forum* encourages submissions from scholars, students, and general readers. Submissions must demonstrate a degree of familiarity with Ellul's thought and must engage with it in a critical way. Submissions may be sent to ellulforum@gmail.com.

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Editor's Letter

This issue of the *Forum* offers a meditation by Sue F. Wentworth responding to “The Dialogue of Sign and Presence” that appeared in our Spring 2020 issue. Following this, we provide two essays on Bernard Charbonneau’s relationship with the Christian faith, by Frédéric Rognon and by Patrick Chastenet. We are especially grateful to Christian Roy for providing English translation of the two essays originally written in French.

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Real Presence

Sue F. Wentworth

Stirred by a gentle breeze, the water lapping the logs and rocks submerged at the pond's edge ripples in concentric circles from every protruding point. The circles meet and overlap in widening patterns, a graceful dance of wind, water, and earth, of what moves and what stands. Nature's art, at once ephemeral and timeless.

Jacob Marques Rollison's suggestion in his introduction to Ellul's "Dialogue of Sign and Presence" that Ellul is not first a thinker of technique, but a thinker of presence, locates the heart of Ellul's thought in a dynamic center that also ripples outward, tending to the whole, deepening mystery.¹ I look forward to reading Rollison's just-published *A New Reading of Jacques Ellul: Presence and Communication in the Postmodern World* for his extended exploration. In the interim, I am intrigued. If we begin by hearing Ellul as a thinker of presence, what do we hear? What are the concentric circles that ripple outward in dynamic patterns?

What follows is a meditation on this center and these circles. What is "presence," I wonder, for Ellul? *How* is presence? How is it manifest in his life and thought? And if, as Rollison proposes, "*technique* can be understood as *anti-presence*," how might presence inform our perspective on and response to technique?² What is the relation between presence and hope? How might we *live* presence, in this world of absences and absencing?

Long ago you laid the foundations of the earth
and the heavens are the work of your hands.
They will perish but you endure;
They wear out like garments;
but you are the same and your years have no end.
—Psalm 102:26–28

A defining event in Jacques Ellul's life, now familiar to his readers, was one of which he rarely spoke. Some sixty years after the fact he told his interviewer, Patrick Chastenet:

Suddenly, and I have not doubts on this at all, I knew myself to be in the presence of a something so astounding, so overwhelming that had entered me to the very center of my being. That's all I can tell you. I was so moved that I left the room in a stunned state. In the courtyard there was a bicycle lying around. I jumped on it and fled. I have no idea whatsoever how many dozens of kilometers I must have covered. Afterwards I thought to myself: "You have been in the presence of God." And there you are.³

Chastenet asks, "Could you physically see or hear this presence?" Ellul responds, "No. No words were uttered. I saw nothing. Nothing. But the presence was unbelievably strong. I knew with every nerve in my body that I was in the presence of God."⁴ The immediacy of this unexpected, unsought, astonishing, unquestionable encounter, registered in a profoundly physical way, rings throughout Ellul's life and work. Asked at another time by Chastenet to look back on his life and name the most significant experience of his life, Ellul responded by mentioning this moment, "when God came to me," as well as a second, when he met Yvette Lensfelt, the person who was to become his wife: "These have been the decisive experiences of my life."⁵

That Ellul tells of initially *running* from this first momentous encounter shatters any comforting notions we may have about it: "... I realized God had spoken, but I didn't want him to have me. I fled."⁶ He "set about reading antichristian writers"; "I wanted to avoid God's presence in my life."⁷ This Presence was no consoling experience to be clung to and sought again; it precipitated a struggle that lasted, according to Ellul, for ten years.⁸

Another decisive experience came later, while Ellul was reading the eighth chapter of Romans, when “for the first time [...] a biblical text really became God’s Word to me,” “a living, contemporary Word.”⁹ This Word “seized” him; here he “encountered the Absolute and Eternity.”¹⁰ This time, the chief fruits of the encounter were *freedom* and *hope*. If before he had assumed that relationship with “God” meant a curtailing of freedom, a narrowing of life, in this encounter he feels life immeasurably broadened and enriched. “Life and freedom, freedom and salvation, that’s what Paul is writing about in this chapter”; the person is set on “the path of freedom,” a freedom inseparable from *hope*.¹¹ “The world [...] *will* be set free from its bondage to corruption. [...] The world consists of darkness. No light remains. But at the heart of this dark world, Paul tells us, hope is nevertheless to be found.”¹² We wait for the healing which *is* to come. Behind, beneath, beside, above, before stands *le Vivant*, this Living One who *is* love. “I saw with blinding certainty that ‘If God is for us, who can be against us?’”¹³

Reflecting back on this second moment of living encounter, Ellul writes, “Today, as I reread this text, I realize that Romans 8, indirectly, without my knowing it, has inspired all the research I’ve done over the last fifty years. One day, many years ago, it gave me an indestructible certainty.”¹⁴ This certainty, we realize, was not the certainty we reflexively equate with “possession,” with “nailing something down”; it was the intangible, ungraspable, liberating certainty of a *being-in-relation*, being-with. “I describe a world with no prospects, but I believe that God accompanies man through his whole existence.”¹⁵ “God descends to humanity and joins us where we are.”¹⁶ This relationship is not a supplement to life; it is life itself: “To be alive is the complete situation of human beings placed before God. . . .”¹⁷ *Divine Presence* is the vital center of *presence*. Created being itself is shot through with a mysterious relationality, a “betweenness.” One hears echoes here of Kierkegaard’s utterly definitive “God-relation.”¹⁸ This is God deeper than God: no object, but the fertile ground of created being.

These encounters became the point of departure for Ellul’s life, his own presence in the world, as well as for his passion for the Christian’s presence in the world. And here we engage with the seminal 1936 essay “The Dialogue of Sign and Presence (Notes for a Christianity Learned by Heart),” already mentioned, and just published thanks to Rollison’s investigations

and the Ellul family's generosity. Ellul begins the article by quoting parallel accounts from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke:

Matt 26:26: And while they were eating, Jesus took bread and having given thanks, broke it, and gave it to them saying: Take, eat, this is my body.

Luke 24:30: And as they were at the table with him, he took bread and gave thanks, then having broken it, he gave it to them. In this way their eyes were opened and they recognized him.

We notice that the first recounts a pre-Crucifixion moment at the Last Supper: Jesus takes bread and, having given thanks, breaks it and gives it to those gathered, inviting them to eat, identifying this with his own body. It is a moment of real presence and a moment of signification. In the second, in a post-Crucifixion moment, two disciples invite a stranger they meet on the way to Emmaus to stop with them for supper: this stranger takes bread and gives thanks; having broken the bread, he gives it to them. And in this act ("in this way"), the risen Christ is present with them: "their eyes were opened and they recognized him." If before, in his presence, the taking, thanking, breaking, and giving were to be for them a sign of his presence ("This is my body"), afterward, the taking, thanking, breaking, and giving *become* his very presence with them.

In these two verses, Ellul begins an essay on the dialogue of sign and presence with a richly layered dialogue of presence and sign and sign and presence! His attention is focused not on words of institution that become a sacrament in an institution; he is captivated by these actual moments of lived and living communion. *Presence* is what matters. "Dogma affirms a presence superior to itself"; "Christian dogma always comes down to this idea of the constant presence of Christ."¹⁹ "Dogma is only meaningful to the extent that for each [person], Christ is temporally near [...]"—present in the present.²⁰

Significantly here, *presence* is a matter of flesh and blood inseparable from spirit, spirit united with flesh and blood:

I would like to remind you that this gift of God took on a human form, that the blood of Christ was not mystical blood but red blood, the blood of a carpenter, who planed boards from city to city until

he was thirty years old, who worked his muscles on the plane and jointer plane.²¹

Consecrated to his ministry, this carpenter healed bodies and souls—most often through physical touch, showing, as Richard Rohr writes,

that healing cannot be done through the head, through explanations, theories and theologies, or quick, “logical” conclusions. It must somehow be a communication of life and love energy, held even at the cellular level.²²

He teaches, challenges, and comforts in living encounters, talking with people, preaching to crowds pressing close against him, sharing meals, hosting meals himself. When he raises the dead body of his friend Lazarus, his own body becomes the target of the authorities, and he “turns his face” toward Jerusalem, where he endures the excruciating physical, mental, and spiritual agony of being put to death at the hands of men.

And then, himself called forth from the dead, he makes his disciples “touch and feel him,” “comes time and again, [... and] walks alongside them”; Ellul comments, “As to the importance of this presence, I need no other testimony than the fact of his showing himself to the disciples after his resurrection.”²³ He invites them to a breakfast he has prepared for them. Again he *feeds* them. And now, he is the One who is *there* “[w]here two or three are gathered in [his] name.”²⁴

“Mysticism” will not do. Something much earthier is happening here, something irreducible—a something that *matters* (the word is instructive) for human beings and for the whole of creation. “In [Jesus Christ] there is the very presence of God inseparably connected with man. . . .”²⁵ The absence into which human beings drift or drive has been permanently invaded: “For Ellul the incarnation is nothing less than God’s rupturing of man’s world set apart from God [...] ‘God in his totality has localized himself in flesh.’”²⁶ Each word of Christ “is a revolt against the detachment of the spirit from the flesh.”²⁷ “Dissociation is impossible. [...] All is indissolubly linked.”²⁸

Quite abruptly I realized that reasoning with the intellect alone
and reasoning based on living experience
are simply worlds apart.—Ellul²⁹

[T]he norm of all human knowledge [... is] the meeting
between persons.—Hans Urs von Balthasar³⁰

Divine Presence is a circle whose radiant center is everywhere (Empedocles). First and last, this surely brings us to rich silence.

In between and within this silence, what might meditation on this resonant Presence yield? We notice, first, that Presence is iconoclastic. It shatters preconceptions, conceptions, representations (re-present-ations), possessed knowledge. Presence is “a power escaping all codification”; “it cannot be translated into defined rules”; “models can no longer be applied.”³¹ It is no object, but living, relational, immediate. Presence is the revelation of mystery: revelation, yes, but of infinite knowability. It is not an “experience” that can be grasped, carried from the past forward into some future. We cannot be present in advance, or after. We hear reverberations of the risen Christ’s admonition to Mary—“Do not hold onto me.”

At the same time that Presence shatters, Presence establishes. It establishes its truth (I AM). Moreover, it establishes the truth of the human being as *person*, as one named, called, beloved (You Are). In the presence of God, the person comes into being. Ellul comments on this link between presence and personhood in “Dialogue” when he asserts that “presence is above all a testimony of the person.”³² *Of* the person—“of” here meaning both *by* the person and *about* the person, as Ellul spells out. The *means through which* communication happens and *what is communicated* are a unity. This resonates with Ellul’s emphasis in *Présence au monde moderne* on the relation of ends and means: “Our starting point is that in the work of God, end and means are brought together. [... In] God’s action the means never appears except as the realized presence of the end.”³³ In divine action, there is no such thing as mere instrumentality. Body and soul, how and what, sign and presence, form and content, method and meaning, means and meaning, are *one*. What and how co-inhere. Sofia Cavalletti puts it this way in another context:

In our estimation, the choice of method is related to the question of content. There are certain contents that cannot be communicated except by certain methodologies. The method is not like an empty box that can be filled with anything whatsoever; the method has a soul, and this soul should correlate to the content that is being transmitted through the method. Between method and content there should be a profound accord, an affinity of nature; otherwise there is the risk of distorting the content.³⁴

Presence presents the unity that pertains in meaning. It has to do with the *whole*. And here a comment of Yvette Ellul in “Dialogue” is particularly astute: “Let’s not forget that ‘the body,’ bodily presence is always linked to spiritual presence; it is presence that you hold to; it is not the body.”³⁵ She continues: “No spiritual presence without bodily presence either, which will be perhaps unreal in the sense of unpalpable, but magnificently real by virtue ‘of the whole’ that it engenders.”³⁶ She refers to what seems to have been her own holistic experience of Presence, which sends her to the Bible, to a passage about the resurrection of Christ. She reads this with astonishment, meditating on the resurrection of the flesh, “which will be the resurrection of the being.”³⁷ And she hits the limit of *thought* about presence:

From here, we plunge into the domain of the unreal and our fingers cling to nothingness and sand. Reason rebels and the spirit withdraws. But we must have the courage to live this instability . . . so close. There is no longer anything but God.³⁸

It is Jacques Ellul who underlines these last two sentences, and adds: “oh my Christian friend!” This is, for both, a “Christianity Learned by Heart.”

Ellul’s living experience and knowledge of God gave birth both to his person and to his personalism, his insistence upon the value and meaning of the person. He knows in his bones that each person dwells in an intimate and inexpressible relationship with Divine Presence. Insofar as persons matter, scale matters, proportion matters, real relation in time and space matters, time and space matter, flesh and blood matter, locality matters, particularity matters.

Immediately after observing that “presence is a testimony of the person,” Ellul speaks of another wholeness, noting “the complete engagement of the being in this gift that one person is to another,” “complete engagement of

God in this gift of God.”³⁹ Presence engages the whole of the participant in the wholeness of the larger relation. Whether between God and humanity or between human beings, this “complete engagement” is a vital unity of giving and being-a-gift.

Finally, we notice elsewhere that for Ellul, Presence is “dimensional.” In a 1956 article entitled “Le pessimisme et la présence au monde,” he insists that “We have to make the dimension of the Wholly Other penetrate and make a breach in the closed universe that man constantly wishes to rebuild.”⁴⁰ In *Hope in Time of Abandonment* he asserts that with hope, “we are in the presence of an entirely different dimension.”⁴¹ Christians are to be “bearers of a dimension that no one else has,” agents of “the insertion of a completely new and unexpected dimension, the incognito.”⁴² The rendering of John and Peter hastening to Jesus’ tomb, featured on the cover of the Spring 2020 *Ellul Forum*, poignantly conveys something of the vitality of encounter with the “entirely different dimension” of the Wholly Other, as did Ellul’s own experiences of encounter with *le Vivant*. The dimensions of our lives matter. *New York Times* editorial writer Michelle Goldberg, fighting despair about the political and cultural condition in the US in the summer of 2020, and looking to the late congressman John Lewis’s example of hope, confesses that she has “started to envy those like Lewis who are able to believe in God.”⁴³

We recall that “dimension” is grounded in space (e.g., height, length, width) and time (e.g., musical measures); the word, with its root *mē*, means “to measure out.” Derivatives include meal (time for eating), measure, immense, diameter, geometry, moon (time being measured by), menstruate, menopause, semester. This is the dimensional, mortal, world in which we are born, the world we feel, see, touch, hear, taste, and smell. Time and space are not just secondary—qualities added to our being—but its “intimate substance.”⁴⁴ “Spacing” is our reality.⁴⁵ Our hearts keep time even as we read these words.

At the same time, dimension functions metaphorically, dialectically, and/or analogically to gesture toward that which is “beyond” time and space. “Deep calls to deep” (Ps 42:7). Augustine suggests that God is *interior intimo meo et superior summo meo*.⁴⁶ Limits point to their own limit, toward the

unlimited. “The encounter with Christ, primordial sign, opens to [human beings] the infinite space of the transcendent.”⁴⁷ Or again, as Marilynne Robinson writes,

An early Christian writer, Gregory of Nyssa, said of God, “That which is without quality cannot be measured, the invisible cannot be examined, the incorporeal cannot be weighed, the limitless cannot be compared, the incomprehensible does not admit of more or less.” From antiquity, insistence on the ontological unlikeness of God to the categories to which the human mind has recourse is at the center of theological reflection.⁴⁸

The tradition bears witness to this unthinkable dimension of the “Wholly Other” as being *fully within* and yet *not bound* by the dimension in which we move. We speak of the “transcendence” of God and at our best do not mean remoteness, distance-from; we mean the unity of absolute otherness and absolute nearness. This is impossible Incarnation.

III

It is a presence, then,
whose margins are our margins;
that calls us out over our
own fathoms.
—R. S. Thomas⁴⁹

I suggest that we see at least three “vitalities” emerge in Ellul’s life and thought, rooted as they are in Presence: a deeply grounded “feeling for presence”; a capacity for the unheld; and deep regard for the personal.

Not surprisingly, this first is hard to put into words—yet it is what Ellul was engaged by in “The Dialogue of Sign and Presence”! If the carnal and the spiritual are one, keen sensitivity to, curiosity about, and respect for *the whole* prevails—and this, not merely conceptually, but vitally. Two extra-Ellulian examples shed light here. Wendell Berry, farmer and writer, once half-joked about forming “the Society for the Preservation of Tangibility.” This society would have “no dues, no meetings, no fund drives, no newsletter”—only, as his interviewer Erik Reece muses, “a state of mind, a desire to preserve what’s authentic, what holds substance, what aspires to the whole.”⁵⁰ Reece, again:

The tangible—that which has actual form and substance. In a culture of avatars, electronic friends, and financial “products” that have no basis in reality, such a fundamentally human society sounds attractive indeed.⁵¹

A second is from Stephen Leslie, also (tellingly) a farmer, who works with horses to cultivate land in Vermont. Leslie, often asked why he does so when using a tractor would be so much faster (“Don’t they take a lot more time?”), responds that using the horses actually gives time back, because they “restore to us the life of the senses.”⁵² Further, he says,

“From an ecological standpoint, it’s just so clean, versus burning fossil fuel, and the compaction you get with a tractor,” he said. “But on that other level, there is just this unending learning curve that keeps you engaged. It’s a window into an instinctual world that is also entirely present. When I’m with the horses they are entirely present to me and to the task at hand. ‘Here we are, this is it, this is what we’re doing.’”⁵³

The second, related “vitality”—a capacity for the unheld—is positive, primary regard for that which cannot be grasped by thought or action. This is Yvette and Jacques Ellul’s “courage to live this instability . . . so close.” It is “openness of thought toward that which surpasses it,” a capacity for being in the presence of what cannot be comprehended without straining after comprehension (literally, “taking around”), for *staying with* this reality.⁵⁴ To say that this regard is “positive” and “primary” is to make the significant distinction between acknowledging that there are limits to what human beings can comprehend, and actually valuing this unknown edge as key, essential, and elemental, thus allowing it to relativize everything else.⁵⁵

For Ellul, thinker of presence, this/that which cannot be grasped is *primary*. Or, to put this more positively, living encounter is primary. It establishes the whole, informs the whole, and gives meaning to the whole. We see this in his relentlessly dialectical mode of thought:

I have sought to confront theological and biblical knowledge and sociological analysis without trying to come to any artificial or philosophical synthesis; instead, I try to place the two face to face, in order to shed some light on what is real socially and real spiritually.⁵⁶

We see it in his exhortation to remember, in dialogue, that “the one is made for the other.”⁵⁷ We see it in his refusal to be prescriptive. We see it in his profound awareness of the distinction between the work of the Wholly Other and human work. We see it in his insistence that this way can only be *lived*. He urges the creation of a new *presence* that can emerge only in time and space in unique and personal real relation with the Wholly Other.

This brings us to the third vitality, also touched on above: deep regard for the personal. In Ellul, this is the Mario factor: “We must not think about ‘human beings’ but about my neighbor Mario.”⁵⁸ Persons matter, in the particularity of body-and-soul. This awareness pertains to the rest of the natural world as well: the mystery of the Wholly Other underwrites, informs, and pervades every being. No wonder the initial and sustained context of Ellul and Charbonneau’s conversations with others was camping trips, immersion in the natural world! Ellul clearly treasured this world, seeing its depth, its mystery, its manifestation of Glory.

IV

You absolutely insist on maintaining your independence
in the material realm.—Ellul, “Dialogue”

To approach Ellul’s life and thought in this way casts his attitude toward *technique* in sharper relief, exposing more clearly the ways in which the instrumental mentality of modern technology stands in active opposition to presence. As he acknowledges in *Hope*, discerning God’s presence (glory) in all things “obviously calls for a tremendous reversal of all our habitual concepts and of the collective technological trend.”⁵⁹

Here, I propose a thought experiment. Keeping in mind Rollison’s proposal that technique is *anti-presence*, and thinking in terms of presence as considered above, what might presence’s opposite be? What is anti-presence in this context, and what light or shadow is thereby cast on modern technology? Taking each of our themes above in turn, we simply briefly sketch out the following:

- Where presence is rooted in Divine Life, so that created being itself is shot through with a mysterious relationality, a “betweenness,” anti-presence confines itself to . . . itself.

- Where presence is iconoclastic, shattering pre-conceived notions and images, anti-presence is invested in “rationality” narrowly conceived and in managing and curating images. It thrives on grasp, control, predictability, and the capacity to manipulate.
- Where presence reveals mystery, anti-presence denies this paradox and stakes its claim on knowledge as that which “gets to the bottom of things,” whether immediately or eventually.
- Where presence establishes, anti-presence scatters and trivializes.
- Where presence resonates with wholeness, anti-presence separates, isolates, sets in opposition.
- Where presence is the origin and home of the personal, anti-presence promotes the impersonal and the anonymous and “is particularly oriented to the destruction of personal relationships.”⁶⁰
- Where presence introduces a dimension that cannot be measured, anti-presence has an affinity for literal dimensions, that which can be measured (shedding light on the drive to *efficiency* as the single dimension in which our merely representational thought moves), or one dimension (flatness).

We recognize, too, in this thought experiment, that anti-presence can also manifest as false presence. Ellul was keenly aware of this: *False Presence in the Modern World* was his response to the misunderstandings that met *Presence in the Modern World*; many readers of the latter assumed that presence in the modern world could be equated with social action, social programs, or political solutions. But, unless originating from Presence, these simply devolve into more sterile techniques. What medieval philosophers and theologians called “false similitude” is potentially illuminating here. For example, if the direct opposite of the virtue of hope is despair, its “false similitude” is presumption. Using this template, having explored presence’s “opposites,” what might its “false similitudes” look like?

- Where presence is rooted in Divine Life, a false similitude of presence might promise, promote, and afford access to and dependence on a power generated from and by human beings. Ellul refers frequently to the drive of human power, “the methods of power,” human “pride and

power.”⁶¹ Rather than manifest the glory of God, these “express the glory of man.”⁶²

- Where presence is irreducibly “between,” a false similitude of presence might emphasize “connection,” and where presence is iconoclastic, a false similitude of presence might celebrate “disruption.” Where presence is the revelation of mystery, a false similitude of presence might offer great wonders, a sense of enchantment, the seemingly miraculous.
- Where presence establishes the person in freedom, a false similitude of presence might offer freedom in terms of the “unlimited”; where presence is the origin and home of the person, a false similitude of presence might valorize “the individual,” whether the “me/I/mine” or the “you.”
- Where presence resonates with wholeness, a false similitude of presence might celebrate “success,” “accomplishment,” material ease and abundance; where presence introduces a dimension that cannot be measured, a false similitude of presence might offer a hall of mirrors.

Artificiality—which Ellul cites as one of the primary characteristics of modern technology—is false presence. We tend to call it “virtuality,” or “virtual presence,” without registering this as an oxymoron. Edward Engelmann writes,

The term “artificial” traditionally refers to something which resembles a natural or original thing, but which is ontologically inferior to it. It is made to resemble the original. The computer pioneer Herbert Simon, in *The Sciences of the Artificial*, articulates such a notion when he says that the artificial is an imitation involving resemblance from without rather than from within. The imitation resembles the real insofar as it turns the same face to the external system.⁶³

The technological *has* no interior dimension; as Ellul observes, technical products mean nothing by themselves.⁶⁴

In this thought experiment, we must also acknowledge the full-stop negation of presence, which is absence. This would cohere with “the will to death, the will to suicide,” which Ellul identifies as being at the heart of the world as it turns its back on *le Vivant*.⁶⁵

What this overall schematic of presence/anti-presence lacks in subtlety it can perhaps make up for as a stark perspective from which to see and engage with modern technology. It is a sobering view. As Ellul reminds us early in *Presence in the Modern World*, communion with Christ “brings Christians face to face with the world’s spiritual reality, not its material might. [... T]hey struggle not against flesh and blood but against ‘thrones, powers, dominations.’”⁶⁶ Further, it is a reminder of the extent to which this communion remains a scandal in the world, an opposition that cannot be attenuated.⁶⁷

V

In his very absence, this absent God
is the one who gives meaning.
—Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*

Nothing was more true for Ellul than the presence of *le Vivant*. This presence IS truth. For “the mass of people in the Western world,” however, “God is no longer present.”⁶⁸ The Wholly Other has turned away, refuses to speak, is the Absent Other. “God makes himself absent in this world of absences, which modern man has put together with enthusiasm.”⁶⁹ It is this widespread sense of and choice for absence that defines the modern world.

In the face of this absence, one sensible option is despair, faithlessness, hopelessness. Another more socially acceptable option is the “false similitude” of hope that Ellul, I think, would equate with the purely human-driven “search for means, for a solution to the problem, for a rational decision, for personal commitment.”⁷⁰ Ellul urges the decision, instead, for authentic hope—hope that does not come from humanity. “The Wholly Other” acts first to recreate the world; this is the incomprehensible origin of hope. And now, according to Ellul, in the face of God’s felt absence, hope becomes the human being’s “answer to God’s silence.”⁷¹ It is this hope—given and chosen, expressed through waiting, prayer, and realism—that becomes the face of presence in a bereft world.⁷² Hope alone is what “now [...] really nourishes,” “supplies the bread and the wine with their meaning.”⁷³

This hope is by no means optimism. It is not even recognizable as “hope.” Ellul proposes “the incognito” as “perhaps the genuine, serious, and pro-

found form of hope today,” insofar as “the incognito” corresponds with God’s incognito in Jesus (more lovely echoes here of Kierkegaard, and of the Gospel of John), as well as with God’s incognito in God’s contemporary silence.⁷⁴ This form of hope will expose and leave a “gap,” make “a break in the conversation,” insert “a completely new and unexpected dimension.”⁷⁵ This incognito will live out a relationship, one that gives shape and meaning to all other relationships, without trying to “externalize” that relationship verbally with those who are not interested. In this context, we may remember Ellul’s description of his mother when he tells her of his conversion to Christianity. They are in the kitchen; she is standing at the sink with her back to him. According to Ellul, “She replied without even turning round that she was not at all surprised and that she had been praying each night for that to happen ever since I was born.”⁷⁶ Without even turning around! She had kept her promise to her husband not to teach their son her faith. Yet her life was rooted in hope. She was living the incognito in its poverty and power.

In the absence at the heart of the modern world, the Christian, and the Church, are called to this way of presence, “what we first have to live as a relation with God.”⁷⁷ There *is* no vital Christian response to technology outside of this immediately lived personal and communal relation. The Christian, and the Church, are not fundamentally anti-technique, nor are they pro-technique; the Christian, and the Church, are fundamentally *for* presence/Presence. They can be for technology only insofar as technology serves the glory of God, when it is “put back into the movement of hope,” “a movement toward the Lord who is coming, in which we include things as well.”⁷⁸ We begin with Presence and end there too: *Parousia*, the “Second Coming,” we remember, literally means “presence,” “being alongside.”

VI

Now I am revealing new things to you, things hidden
and unknown to you, created just now, this very moment.
Of these things you have heard nothing until now so that
you cannot say, O yes, I knew this.—Isaiah 48:6–7

If presence is the beginning, middle, and end, how might this shape the life of the Christian in the world? One can imagine, but never imagine!

Out of a lived relation with *le Vivant*, one can imagine a revolution in the human experience of time and space. “Present,” after all, attests at once to time and to space and so to the unity of this medium in which we move. To be present is to recover time and space, time-space, as the medium in which the Holy moves. Ellul asserts that hope “produces a restructuring of our time,” is “constructive of true time.”⁷⁹ Hope, as “the meeting place of the future with eternity,” “causes this future-eternity relation to intervene in the present instant and in the current event. Hope is that which establishes the right relation between a future [...] and a present.”⁸⁰

Coming to regard time and space as our “intimate substance,” we may be able to see and live it at once as limit *and* as possibility: as von Balthasar observes, “It is important to consider that the limits of a finite being are at the same time its contours, its form, indeed, its beauty.”⁸¹ This is what it means to be a creature, and to have a place in a larger living reality. As Gregory of Nyssa said, Divine Wisdom “has circumscribed each being within its own proper dimensions, by giving it a suitable rhythm as a limit, so to speak, so that it may be included in the rightful harmony of the universe.”⁸² This is antithetical to the ways in which a technological society works to compress time—“save” time—and collapse space. By working to bring the distant close—how many relatively freshly minted words begin with the prefix *tele-* (literally, “far off, distant”)!—are we obscuring what is actually present?

One aspect of this redeemed relation to time and space would be an alert sensitivity to *what it is time for*. This is waiting in open poverty for *le Vivant*. Waiting, instead of being an unfortunate anomaly, a breakdown in the system, would be experienced as the *locus* of action.⁸³ And prayer, far from being a pious exercise, would be the arena of relation, vital attunement in time to the movement of *le Vivant*. As Eastern Orthodox Christians are exhorted, “Every morning put your mind into your heart and stand in the presence of God all the day long.”⁸⁴

One can imagine deep, abundant attentiveness, an attentiveness that is not a “what,” a technique, but radical relation. As Iain McGilchrist suggests in his studies in neuropsychology,

Attention [...] intrinsically is a *way in which*, not a thing: it is intrinsically a relationship, not a brute fact. It is a “howness,” a something

between, an aspect of consciousness itself, not a “whatness,” a thing in itself, an object of consciousness. It brings into being a world and, with it, depending on its nature, a set of values.⁸⁵

One can imagine here a revolution in our ways of seeing the “artificial.” Out of a lived relation with *le Vivant*, a living distinction might emerge between the “inspired” artificial, that which is made by human beings *in concert with* the Wholly Other, which bears witness to another life-giving, unfathomable, generative dimension of human life (e.g., great art, great technology?), and the “flat” or “dead” artificial (e.g., bad art, technology that finally bears witness to nothing but itself). The former is the truly creative; the latter, the merely manufactured. One plays freely in the arena of the whole; the other only fractures and exploits.

With this, lived relation with *le Vivant* might energize perception of a more fundamental distinction between the artificial and the natural. The ancient Greeks observed a difference between things that “grow by themselves into whatever they become” and things that owe their existence to human making.⁸⁶ They also saw another difference with clear relevance here: “Artifacts have merely accidental forms that are imposed on them, in contrast to the substantial, intrinsic forms of natural things.”⁸⁷ To appreciate such a living distinction between the natural and the artificial would stand in piquant contrast to the contemporary, shifting distinction between the virtual and “IRL.”

If *le Vivant* is the wellspring, presence is life flowing forth. Those animated by the truth of presence will stand *for* presence by *being* present. They will know themselves as people who need to break bread together to know what communion is.⁸⁸ They will know that how their beings are physically engaged in the world matters. Where “everything has become means” and “the end no longer exists,” they will not give up questioning means and considering ends.⁸⁹ They will move with freedom and hope, trusting life to be infinitely undergirded. They will know what moves and what stands, and the dance between. Especially, they will know that the primary work is God’s, the Wholly Other, so close.

1. Jacob Marques Rollison, "The Dialogue of Sign and Presence: Introduction." *Ellul Forum* 65 (Spring 2020), 14.
2. Rollison, "The Dialogue of Sign and Presence," 14.
3. Patrick Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, trans. Joan Mendès France (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 52.
4. Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, 52.
5. Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, 93.
6. Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul: Interviews by Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange*, trans. Lani K. Niles (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 14, quoted in Andrew Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 10.
7. Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, 52–53.
8. Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, 14.
9. Jacques Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," trans. Alfred Krass and Martine Wessel. *Ellul Forum* 65 (Spring 2020), 5.
10. Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," 5.
11. Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," 6.
12. Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," 7–8.
13. Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," 8.
14. Ellul, "How I Discovered Hope," 8.
15. Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, 1.
16. Jacques Ellul quoted in Willem H. Vanderburg, ed., *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (Toronto: Anansi, 2004), 78.
17. Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2016), 61.
18. See, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, "Love Is the Fulfilling of the Law." In *Works of Love*, trans. Howard and Edna Hong (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 99–136.
19. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "The Dialogue of Sign and Presence," trans. Jacob Marques Rollison. *Ellul Forum* 65 (Spring 2020), 24–25.

20. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 25.
21. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 25.
22. Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, Daily Meditations (Sept. 14, 2020), <https://cac.org/god-uses-everything-2020-09-14/>.
23. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 26.
24. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 26.
25. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 136, quoted in Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World*, 95.
26. Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World*, 95–96.
27. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 26.
28. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 27.
29. Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, 54.
30. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The God Question and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1967), 32.
31. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 24.
32. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 26.
33. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 51.
34. Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 158.
35. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 28.
36. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 28.
37. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 28.
38. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 28.
39. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, "Dialogue," 26.
40. Ellul, "Le pessimisme et la présence au monde." *Le Semeur* 55.2 (1956), 52, quoted in Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World*, 105.
41. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1973), 217.
42. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 250, 296.
43. Michelle Goldberg, "John Lewis Believed America Would Survive Trump." *New York Times* (July 31, 2020), A25, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/30/opinion/john-lewis-legacy.html>.

44. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought: Essays on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa*, trans. Mark Sebanc (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 28.
45. Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 28.
46. The whole translated sentence reads, “Yet all the time You were more inward to me than the most inward place of my heart and loftier than the highest” (perhaps more familiar to us as, “You are closer to me than I am to myself”). Augustine of Hippo, *The Confessions of St. Augustine, Books I–X*, trans. F. J. Sheed (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), 41.
47. Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, 167.
48. Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of the Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 4–5. She cites von Balthasar’s *Presence and Thought*, 27, as her source for the quotation from Gregory of Nyssa.
49. R. S. Thomas, “A.D.” In *Collected Later Poems: 1988–2000* (Glasgow: Bloodaxe, 2004), 118.
50. Erik Reece, “Wendell Berry’s Wild Spirit.” *Garden and Gun* (Aug.–Sept. 2011), 81.
51. Reece, “Wendell Berry’s Wild Spirit,” 81.
52. I have been unable to verify the source of this quotation.
53. Anne Raver, “Farm Equipment that Runs on Oats.” *New York Times* (May 15, 2013) <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/16/garden/farm-equipment-that-runs-on-oats.html>.
54. Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 171.
55. A salient contrast is Francis Bacon’s acknowledgment of what he called “the Kingdom of Heaven” and the “Kingdom of Politics,” both of which he then firmly puts aside, calling for a focus instead on the “Kingdom of Nature.” This Kingdom, he argued, was one over which human beings had been given *dominion*; the “new organon” he proposed was a way of looking at and moving in the world appropriate to this dominion. It is a perceptual framework that excludes whatever cannot be rationally grasped. See Francis Bacon, *The New Organon* [1620], ed. Fulton H. Anderson (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1960).
56. Quoted by David Cain in his introduction to *Dying unto Life* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2013), 2.
57. Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 78.

58. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 79.
59. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 236.
60. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 84.
61. It is striking in this context to consider the names of “power companies”: Dominion, EverSource, UniSource, Reliant, Sempra, [Locale] Power & Light. It is clear the extent to which technology in general is looked upon as a “savior.”
62. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 236.
63. Edward M. Engelmann, *Nature and the Artificial* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2017), 158.
64. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 236.
65. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 15.
66. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 1–2.
67. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 7.
68. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 130.
69. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 125.
70. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 204.
71. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 176.
72. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 258.
73. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 168.
74. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 288.
75. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 296.
76. Troude-Chastenet, *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Christianity, and Technology*, 41.
77. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 238.
78. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 233–38.
79. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 230–31.
80. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 230–31.
81. Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 29.
82. Von Balthasar, *Presence and Thought*, 29.
83. “The Archdeacon was still gazing at the chalice as if in a trance. But now he was conscious of some slight movement on his own part towards which he was impelled; he knew the signs of that approaching direction, and awaited it serenely.

By long practice he had accustomed himself in any circumstances—in company or alone, at work or at rest, in speech or in silence—to withdraw into that place where action is created. The cause of all action there disposed itself according to that Will which was its nature, and, so disposing itself, moved him easily as a part of its own accommodation to the changing wills of men, so that at any time and at all times its own perfection was maintained, now known in endurance, now in beauty, now in wisdom, now in joy. There was no smallest hesitation which it would not solve, nor greatest anxiety which it did not make lucid” (Charles Williams, *War in Heaven* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968], 117–18).

84. Quoted in *Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich*, ed. Robert Llewelyn (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), 70.
85. Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Western World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 29.
86. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 150–51.
87. Engelmann, *Nature and the Artificial*, 8.
88. Jacques Ellul and Yvette Ellul, “Dialogue,” 25–26.
89. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 40.

Bernard Charbonneau et le christianisme

Frédéric Rognon

Les relations de Bernard Charbonneau à la foi chrétienne sont tout sauf simples et univoques. Après avoir grandi dans un milieu chrétien (son père est protestant et sa mère catholique) et avoir vécu une expérience de scoutisme unioniste (de dix à seize ans) qui s'avère décisive pour sa sensibilité à la nature et à la liberté, il se dira agnostique et post-chrétien, tout en récitant le « Notre Père » tous les jours jusqu'à la fin de sa vie... Par ailleurs, son œuvre est pétrie de références bibliques et d'allusions à la tradition chrétienne, qu'il connaît fort bien, davantage sans doute que bien des croyants, alternant des mentions respectueuses, voire élogieuses, et de vives critiques. Enfin, on ne peut saisir la teneur des affinités et des points de rupture entre Bernard Charbonneau et le christianisme, sans intégrer dans l'analyse sa confrontation avec Jacques Ellul. On sait que les deux amis, unis pendant une soixantaine d'années « par une pensée commune », se distinguaient sur plusieurs questions dont celle de la foi chrétienne, et entraient à ce sujet en une *disputatio* continue que seules autorisaient, une estime mutuelle et une gratitude réciproque sans bornes.

Je me propose donc d'éclairer quelque peu le rapport paradoxal entre Bernard Charbonneau et le christianisme en examinant successivement : 1) les références chrétiennes, implicites et explicites ; 2) la critique du christianisme ; 3) l'éloge du christianisme ; 4) la thèse de l'ambivalence du christianisme dans ses relations à la nature ; et enfin 5) le dialogue avec Jacques Ellul au sujet du christianisme.

I. Les références de Bernard Charbonneau à la Bible et à la tradition chrétienne

L'inventaire des motifs issus des corpus scripturaires, symboliques et théologiques, dans l'ensemble de l'œuvre devrait nous permettre de prendre la mesure du référentiel chrétien dans la pensée charbonnienne, et de tenter d'élucider le statut contrasté de la foi et de la tradition chrétiennes dans son positionnement existentiel.

Les références de Bernard Charbonneau à la Bible et à la tradition chrétienne sont innombrables, et servent généralement soit d'objets d'analyse historique, soit d'exemples, au prix d'un déplacement sémantique, d'une reconfiguration ou d'un détournement de sens. Nous n'en citerons que quelques-unes, à titre d'exemples, parmi des centaines, en commençant par les références explicites et en poursuivant par les références implicites.

A. *Références explicites* (assez rarement, Bernard Charbonneau donne la référence scripturaire précise) :

- La colère de l'Éternel contre le dénombrement d'Israël et de Juda, relatée en 2 Samuel 24, est appliquée à l'informatisation¹.
- Un présage de la mort du roi Baltasar dans le livre du prophète Daniel, est appliqué à la mystique du développement à tout prix² (exceptionnellement, Bernard Charbonneau a recours à une note de bas de page pour expliciter une citation biblique sollicitée à l'appui de sa démonstration).
- Des versets tirés de l'épisode de la tour de Babel en Genèse 11 permettent d'illustrer la menace totalitaire contre la liberté³.
- Dans un éloge à la nourriture savoureuse, une référence explicite à la première épître aux Corinthiens rappelle que l'apôtre Paul a libéré les chrétiens des tabous alimentaires⁴.
- Et lorsqu'il s'agit de montrer que Dieu se distingue de la toute-puissance matérielle, Bernard Charbonneau multiplie les références bibliques en note de bas de page⁵.

B. *Références implicites* (plus généralement, Bernard Charbonneau fait une simple allusion à un motif biblique, ce qui pose un problème de lisibilité

et de compréhension aux générations détachées de toute familiarité avec la tradition scripturaire, surtout lorsque le message biblique fait l'objet d'un détournement de sens) :

- Bernard Charbonneau ose un parallèle suggestif entre Charlie Chaplin et Jésus... Nous couvrons d'or Charlot, ce Pauvre que nous avons enrichi : « Il en est d'ailleurs un autre auquel cette aventure est arrivée. Sans doute était-il plus redoutable ; car avant de couvrir d'or son image et de l'offrir dans de vastes salles à l'admiration du public, nous l'avons solidement clouée à une croix »⁶.
- Dans sa critique de la science, Bernard Charbonneau cite cette parole « d'un sous-développé sémite » : « Aimez-vous les uns les autres », et commente : « Je ne pense pas qu'il ait découvert ce principe à l'aide d'un radiotélescope »⁷.
- Au sujet de Napoléon : « La Matière s'est faite chair »⁸, par référence implicite au prologue de Jean⁹.
- Au sujet des paysans : « En eux pour toujours le Verbe s'est incarné »¹⁰, par référence au même texte.
- Au sujet du foyer : « Où trouver ailleurs la vie, la vérité et la voie ? »¹¹, détournant le sens de la formule de Jésus dans les derniers entretiens avec ses disciples¹².
- La même référence est implicite au sujet de la voiture : « La bagnole, c'est la vérité et la vie, mais surtout la Voie, à laquelle tout doit être sacrifié, et le sacrifice humain est le plus haut de tous »¹³.
- Au sujet de la liberté : elle « n'apporte pas la paix mais l'épée »¹⁴, par allusion à l'expression que Jésus emploie au sujet de lui-même¹⁵.
- La même expression est sollicitée à propos de la science : « Elle n'est pas venue apporter la paix mais l'épée, qu'elle perfectionne sans cesse »¹⁶.
- Elle est également convoquée pour constater que tout impératif religieux ne peut exhorter les hommes à dépasser leur nature que par une forme de violence spirituelle¹⁷.
- Au sujet de l'esprit : « Nul ne sait où va ni d'où vient qui tombe pour lui avoir obéi »¹⁸, par référence au saint Esprit dans l'entretien de Jésus avec Nicodème¹⁹.

- La même référence est convoquée au sujet de la voiture : « L'automobile idéale, c'est le Saint-Esprit, qui va et souffle où il veut »²⁰.
- Et toujours au sujet de la voiture : « Il est dit que l'hommauto ne vivra pas seulement de Super »²¹, par allusion à la répartition de Jésus au tentateur, selon laquelle l'homme ne vivra pas de pain seulement²².
- La liberté est dite « folie pour la chair, scandale pour l'esprit »²³, reconfiguration totale du verset qui prêchait Christ crucifié, « scandale pour les Juifs et folie pour les païens »²⁴.
- « Comme un cerf altéré brame », « l'homme a soif de vérité »²⁵, dit Bernard Charbonneau, citant le Psaume 42 qui concernait l'âme du psalmiste assoiffée du Dieu vivant²⁶.
- La même référence est sollicitée dans un vibrant éloge de l'eau, afin d'établir que l'eau n'est pas seulement source de vie physique, mais de vie spirituelle, et que toutes les traditions religieuses aspirent au flot qui apaisera enfin leur soif²⁷.
- Dans le même plaidoyer en faveur d'un retour à la pureté de l'eau, notre auteur cite la formule de Jésus à Nicodème²⁸ : « Si un homme ne naît d'eau et d'esprit, il n'entrera pas au Royaume de Dieu »²⁹, et afin de mieux dénoncer la pollution de l'eau, c'est par référence au baptême de Jean-Baptiste près de Salim³⁰ qu'il annonce dramatiquement que le Jourdain pourrait aujourd'hui devenir de sang³¹.
- Dans une dénonciation des nouveaux rapports de l'homme à la terre, Bernard Charbonneau subvertit et prolonge la formule du Christ³² pour dire que « nous ne laissons plus les morts enterrer les morts, nous les déterrions »³³.
- Substituant l'homme, l'espace et le temps, à la loi³⁴, notre auteur évoque la nostalgie d'un règne où « l'espace et le temps, l'homme, ne seraient pas abolis mais accomplis »³⁵.
- Par le rappel de l'épisode dans lequel Josué avait arrêté le cours du soleil³⁶, Bernard Charbonneau met une référence biblique au service d'un certain épicurisme, en affirmant que nous pouvons ralentir le temps en étant présents à soi, au prochain et à l'univers³⁷.

- Afin de mettre en scène les rapports d'ingratitude entre l'homme et le nature, c'est la parabole du fils prodigue³⁸ qui est évoquée : « C'est la nature qui a engendré ce fils prodigue qui la renie, et il lui reste lié pour ce qui est de son existence physique et même spirituelle »³⁹.
- Dans sa critique de l'idolâtrie de l'argent, Bernard Charbonneau n'hésite pas à subvertir l'expression évangélique au sujet de l'impôt dû à l'empereur⁴⁰, en déclarant : « Il arrive parfois qu'on doive rendre à Rothschild ce qui est à César. On voit à peu près ce qui reste à Dieu »⁴¹.
- La même référence biblique apparaît dans la critique de l'État et de Jean-Jacques Rousseau : « Comment rendre à César ce qui est à César sans lui rendre un peu ce qui est à Dieu, souverain de tout ? »⁴².
- Et dans une critique du déferlement technologique, Bernard Charbonneau cite la phrase de Jésus qui met en tension le monde et l'âme⁴³, afin de l'actualiser et d'en prolonger la méditation : « “Que servirait-il à un homme de gagner le monde, s'il se détruisait ou se perdait lui-même ?” Et nous savons qu'aujourd'hui il pourrait bien perdre le monde en se perdant »⁴⁴.
- Les dernières lignes de *Notre table rase* associent une formule anonymisée de Luther (sommé de se rétracter devant la Diète de Worms en 1521) : « Je ne puis autrement... »⁴⁵, que notre auteur assume pour légitimer son engagement et celui de son lecteur en faveur de la terre, à une référence implicite aux murailles de Jéricho⁴⁶ : « Quand retentit cet air de trompette, parfois les murs s'écroulent »⁴⁷, afin de donner à son lecteur l'espérance d'une efficacité de cet engagement.

Ces exemples montrent la récurrence et la variété des références bibliques et théologiques, surtout implicites, dans le corpus charbonnien. Il nous faut à présent rendre compte, de manière plus systématique, de la critique directe du christianisme élaborée par notre auteur.

II. La critique charbonnienne du christianisme

Le premier livre publié par Bernard Charbonneau est une déconstruction impitoyable de l'une des icônes théologiques du moment et de sa mythologie : Pierre Teilhard de Chardin⁴⁸. Le reproche cardinal qu'il énonce à

l'encontre de la pensée de ce dernier est la menace qu'elle fait peser sur la liberté : Teilhard de Chardin a construit un système fermé, tourné vers le tout et l'absolu⁴⁹. Toute contradiction est en effet appelée à se résoudre à un niveau supérieur, le monde s'unifiant finalement en Dieu⁵⁰. Teilhard de Chardin s'est ainsi placé du point de vue de Dieu⁵¹. Toute chose se trouve ainsi réconciliée en un grand tout divin ; l'Église n'a donc plus qu'à consacrer la réalité du monde, en lui ajoutant simplement le nom de Dieu : socialisme chrétien, cinéma chrétien, pourquoi pas des camps de concentration chrétiens ? « Le substantif n'appartient plus au christianisme, il ne lui reste plus que le qualificatif »⁵². Cette critique, typiquement kierkegaardienne, laisse sous-entendre la légitimité d'alternatives chrétiennes à Teilhard de Chardin. Bernard Charbonneau n'hésite d'ailleurs pas à formuler une critique théologique de frappe éminemment orthodoxe, traquant ainsi les contradictions interne à la pensée teilhardienne sur son propre terrain : « Si dans ce système le Mal n'est plus le Mal, la Croix n'est plus la Croix »⁵³. Or, la Mort a été vaincue à la Croix, et « le Christ nous a ordonné de nous reconnaître pécheurs »⁵⁴ (soulignons le « nous » inclusif sous la plume de notre auteur) :

Le Mal n'étant pas essentiel, la Rédemption devient superflue : quelle est la place de la Croix dans le Progrès ? (...) Le sacrifice du Christ perd son prix, et la vie du chrétien sa gravité. Il n'y a plus de salut parce qu'il n'y a plus de perte. Rien ne saurait empêcher le triomphe total du Bien⁵⁵.

La première critique du christianisme est donc la critique d'une certaine théologie au nom du christianisme. Elle s'élargit ensuite pour englober le puritanisme protestant d'une part, et l'ensemble du catholicisme de l'autre. La haine puritaine de la nature pécheresse de l'homme est absente de l'Évangile⁵⁶, tonne un Bernard Charbonneau encore soucieux, en kierkegaardien fidèle, de distinguer la source chrétienne de sa subversion par la chrétienté. Le culte de l'argent dénoncé par le christianisme (c'est-à-dire dans les textes du Nouveau Testament) règne à l'évidence dans la société chrétienne⁵⁷. Et depuis la fin de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, les Églises, ayant raté le coche à vapeur, « ont trop peur de manquer le coche à essence. L'ancienne théologie niait la machine, la nouvelle la consacre : un coup de goupillon donnera à Total une odeur d'eau bénite »⁵⁸. La liquidation de

l'agriculture et de la campagne se joue avec le soutien de l'Église catholique, qui veut ainsi faire oublier ses compromissions avec le « retour à la terre » pétainiste⁵⁹. Ainsi se manifeste, à chaque période, le conformisme du catholicisme à l'égard de l'ordre dominant. Les Églises survivantes ont donné trop de preuve de leur manque d'imagination et de « leur lâcheté devant le monde industriel »⁶⁰.

Mais les griefs de Bernard Charbonneau à l'encontre du christianisme se font plus incisifs, plus substantiels et plus fondamentaux. Il reproche notamment aux textes bibliques de dire tout et son contraire⁶¹. La conception chrétienne du travail, par exemple, oscille entre malédiction et salut⁶² : manger du pain à la sueur de son front est ainsi vécu comme une malédiction bénie puisqu'elle est infligée par Dieu⁶³. Par ailleurs, le changement pour le changement est devenu une valeur du fait du christianisme, qui se situe à l'origine de l'inquiétude et de l'agitation occidentale : la vie chrétienne est conversion, mutation permanente⁶⁴. De même, l'expression « Croissez et multipliez ! »⁶⁵, justifiant la croissance exponentielle, interroge Bernard Charbonneau : « Quelle divinité ou nature a imposé à l'homme ce destin ? »⁶⁶, alors que croître, c'est périr. L'hypocrisie chrétienne a « pollué » le mot « amour »⁶⁷. Plus grave encore, notre auteur reproche au christianisme sa mise en cause de la liberté : le chrétien est l'homme de la bonne conscience, de l'esquive de la mort, du conformisme spirituel et donc social, et finalement de la justification, qui rend superflu de transformer le monde et soi-même ; or, la liberté est le refus de toute justification⁶⁸. Et finalement, dans *Comment ne pas penser*, Bernard Charbonneau fait du christianisme le second (après le nombrilisme) des seize remèdes contre la propension à penser⁶⁹. Le principal grief déployé à son encontre est sa complaisance face à l'histoire : « Dieu est amour » : voilà qui arrange bien les choses, et permet de justifier toutes les œuvres des hommes, jusqu'à la bombe atomique. S'il y a une banque chrétienne, pourquoi pas une Gestapo... ? « Bienheureux les pauvres » : le pauvre y trouve une dignité éminente, tandis que le milliardaire ne s'en formalisera pas. On a beaucoup calomnié le christianisme, ajoute Bernard Charbonneau, en l'accusant d'avoir apporté le trouble dans la société ; en réalité, le dégât est moins grand qu'il ne semble au premier abord. Et notre auteur d'ajouter sarcastiquement : l'univers actuel démontre tout entier que le christianisme, loin d'apporter le trouble, a seulement

porté au plus haut point l'aptitude humaine à se défendre de la pensée. Et cependant, dans un raisonnement vigoureusement dialectique, Bernard Charbonneau relève que le christianisme offre à la fois le mal et son meilleur remède, la pensée et la non-pensée, le poison et le contrepoison. Nous retrouverons cette ambivalence au sujet du rapport du christianisme à la nature.

La critique charbonnienne du christianisme culmine en une profession de foi agnostique. Bernard Charbonneau évoque souvent un « Dieu inconnu »⁷⁰. Et cependant, l'affirmation nietzschéenne de la mort de Dieu y est plus récurrente encore dans son œuvre. Ce constat est toujours orienté vers la découverte d'une créativité nouvelle, de facture quasi-divine, en soi-même : « Dieu est mort ?—Ce n'est ni le premier ni le dernier. Qu'en nous, il ressuscite ! Si ton cri est assez fort, peut-être l'entendra-t-il là-haut »⁷¹. C'est sur un mode on ne peut plus paradoxal que Bernard Charbonneau exalte ainsi la responsabilité humaine, sans pour autant exclure l'hypothèse Dieu. « C'est en soi que réside la source »⁷², déclare-t-il pour nier tout intérêt à changer simplement de religion, à passer du christianisme au bouddhisme ou vice-versa.

Enfin, la critique du christianisme s'élargit en une critique de toute religion et du phénomène religieux en tant que tel. La dénonciation se fait plus acerbe lorsqu'il s'agit de mettre en cause les ravages de la religion comme phénomène collectif : lorsqu'elle s'identifie à la société, elle s'avère délétère, car « à plusieurs on se persuade mutuellement »⁷³. Et Bernard Charbonneau de redoubler de sarcasmes, pour pointer la fonction maternante de la société : « Maman est pieuse mais a-t-elle la foi ? J'en doute. S'il n'y a pas plus dévote, il n'y a pas plus sceptique. (...) Elle fait mieux que tuer Dieu (...) elle l'enterre muni des sacrements de l'Église »⁷⁴. « La société a de tout temps nourri les corps et les esprits car pour enchaîner les corps il lui faut enchaîner les âmes. (...) Depuis des siècles, Sainte Maman dupe la faim spirituelle de son bébé en lui faisant prendre l'ombre pour la proie »⁷⁵.

La critique charbonnienne du christianisme, en tant que religion plutôt qu'en tant que foi, s'avère ainsi radicale. Et cependant, elle trouve son contrepoint dans un éloge au moins aussi éloquent.

III. L'éloge charbonnien du christianisme

Bernard Charbonneau salue vigoureusement l'apport du christianisme dans différents domaines qui lui tiennent à cœur. Le premier est sa mise en exergue de principes de vie oubliés ou négligés par la science, dont ils reviennent finalement à contester les présomptions. C'est bien entendu le cas de l'amour : « Aimez vos ennemis »⁷⁶ ne s'est guère vérifié par la pratique et par l'histoire, et en ce sens ce n'est pas une vérité scientifique ; « mais ce n'est pas " $E = mc^2$ " ou la double hélice qui donneront un sens à notre vie »⁷⁷. Les exhortations du Christ ne sont donc pas à recevoir sur le plan démonstratif, mais comme une orientation de l'existence. Le seul reproche que notre auteur s'autorise à faire au « pur christianisme » (après tous les vifs griefs que nous avons exposés plus haut, sans doute adressés à des parodies de christianisme), c'est son exigence extrême ; la loi d'amour dépasserait l'homme de trop haut⁷⁸ : cette critique ne sonne-t-elle pas bien comme un bel éloge ? À cette célébration générale des principes du christianisme s'ajoutent quelques évaluations positives du protestantisme, telle que sa critique justifiée du gaspillage, et par conséquent son sens des responsabilités liées à nos modes de vie⁷⁹.

Néanmoins, la principale vertu du christianisme, aux yeux de Bernard Charbonneau, concerne son invention de la liberté. Notre auteur le dit sans ambages :

S'il faut dater la liberté, c'est de l'an I de J.-C. Seul un Dieu pouvait créer le nouvel homme. Pour diviniser ainsi non pas l'Homme, mais celui qui vit et meurt chaque jour, il fallait que Dieu s'humanisât : que l'esprit divin s'incarnât en un corps et que l'amour du Père fût cloué sur la croix de son fils⁸⁰.

Cette analyse conduit notre auteur à ne pas craindre d'établir le lien étroit entre le Dieu biblique et la liberté :

Qu'est-ce que Dieu ? L'Absolu, la Perfection ? Comment un homme, fini et imparfait, pourrait-il les connaître ? Au moins dans cet Extrême Occident, nous ne savons qu'une chose : c'est que Dieu est quelqu'un ; et que, victime ou juge, en personne il jugera des personnes. Il n'est pas Liberté pure, mais cette liberté vivante et mortelle qui périt et triompha un jour : un vendredi de l'an 33, quelque part

Contrairement aux apparences, il ne s'agit pas là d'une confession de foi, mais d'un examen rigoureux de l'héritage chrétien en Occident. Tout d'abord, Bernard Charbonneau nuance quelque peu le propos en précisant que l'homme libre est issu d'une rencontre entre le judéo-christianisme et la tradition grecque⁸². Ensuite, il montre que c'est moins la liberté elle-même, que l'exigence de liberté, qui a été portée au plus haut point par la foi chrétienne en un Dieu transcendant⁸³. Enfin, le message essentiel de *Je fus* est que cette exigence ne peut être honorée qu'en la révélant en soi-même et à soi-même, sans aucune justification, en refusant notamment celle qui s'opère au nom de la liberté⁸⁴. Or, nous avons vu combien la justification était précisément la marque du chrétien. Seule l'existence individuelle, radicalement subjective, peut être une existence libre, avec toute la teneur tragique et angoissante que cette expérience implique : « Hors de toi tu ne trouveras rien, sinon le vide que ton pas doit franchir. Hélas ! toi seul peux le faire. Il n'y a pas de liberté, mais une libération, et surtout un libérateur »⁸⁵. « L'incarnation n'a qu'un lieu, qu'un auteur : toi. Si tu le dis toi-même tu diras : moi »⁸⁶. « Si la liberté est un défi jeté au ciel et à la terre, je suis ce défi »⁸⁷. La dernière page de *Je fus*, tout en confirmant cette irréductibilité de l'existence libre à toute instance extérieure, renoue néanmoins avec des accents plus dialectiques : « Choisis ta liberté, ne t'en justifie plus. Il est encore temps, tu es encore vivant sur terre. Nul ne peut le faire à ta place ; ni la Nature qui n'a pas d'esprit hors du tien, ni Dieu qui, s'il existe, te veut libre à son image »⁸⁸. La liberté est donc à la fois l'expérience de la singularité absolue, et l'écho d'une hypothèse Dieu jamais totalement disqualifiée, encore moins récusée.

L'un des tout derniers écrits de Bernard Charbonneau, intitulé : *Quatre témoins de la liberté. Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski*⁸⁹, publié à titre posthume vingt-trois ans après sa mort, semble infléchir sa pensée vers une orientation résolument christologique. Il serait fort instructif de confronter ce dernier titre avec son *Je fus*, consacré à la même thématique de la liberté, mais comme on vient de le voir, dans une toute autre approche, de frappe agnostique. Au sujet de Berdiaev, notre auteur manifeste combien sa pensée lui est proche, avant de préciser :

N'était-ce une foi chrétienne hautement proclamée par Berdiaev, qu'un incroyant post-chrétien n'a aucune raison de récuser. Car la foi de Berdiaev est d'abord la puissance qui meut sa pensée sur son chemin, et l'aide à dépasser certains faux dilemmes de droite et de gauche où d'autres chrétiens s'embourbent⁹⁰.

L'évocation de Berdiaev paraît faire la transition entre les dernières lignes de *Je fus*, et celles des *Quatre témoins*, consacrées à Dostoïevski :

La liberté chrétienne n'est pas une vérité qu'on possède, une solution donnée d'avance (...) Sommes-nous de taille à nous convertir à l'appel d'un Dieu de liberté sans être soutenus par la foi—qui est aussi humainement croyance—en un Dieu-homme ? Est-ce possible, à une époque prise entre la mort de Dieu et l'angoisse religieuse qui travaille encore notre espèce ?⁹¹

Au soir de sa vie, Bernard Charbonneau ne se serait-il pas laissé convaincre par la pertinence inégalable du christianisme, pour tracer un authentique chemin de liberté ?

Comme toujours avec Bernard Charbonneau, les choses ne sont pas si simples. Plutôt que d'un saut de la foi à la Kierkegaard, mieux vaut discerner chez lui un rapport dialectique au christianisme, puissamment étayé par l'analyse du caractère foncièrement ambivalent de ce dernier. Cette dimension paradoxale du christianisme, qui invite à une relation paradoxale avec lui, se manifeste tout particulièrement dans son lien à la nature.

IV. La thèse de l'ambivalence du christianisme dans ses relations à la nature

Religion du paradoxe, le christianisme entretient des relations ambivalentes avec bien d'autres objets qu'avec la nature. En voici deux exemples. Avec la pensée, que le christianisme produit autant que la non-pensée, comme nous l'avons vu : Jésus-Christ « désigne à la fois l'essentiel du mal et son meilleur remède »⁹². « Nous devons au christianisme en même temps qu'une aggravation du mal de la pensée, un approfondissement des réflexes qui nous en défendent »⁹³. Second exemple d'ambivalence, et même de trivalence : la nourriture. Selon Bernard Charbonneau, le refus du formalisme alimentaire des juifs a pu conduire les chrétiens aussi bien aux excès du laisser-aller,

à l'indifférence, qu'à la libération de l'esprit⁹⁴. Ainsi la révolution chrétienne a-t-elle encore des conséquences plurivoques sur les comportements d'aujourd'hui. Notre auteur affine ensuite son analyse, sur un mode fort stimulant : l'absence d'orthodoxie alimentaire en christianisme a paradoxalement conduit à la multiplication des orthodoxies dans l'Occident post-chrétien, qui vont du mépris à la sanctification des nourritures⁹⁵ : la liberté produit en réalité la prolifération des orthopraxies contradictoires.

Les relations entre le christianisme et la nature sont elles aussi foncièrement ambivalentes. La « Nature » est née en Judée avec la notion de « Création » : il devient alors possible de la connaître et d'agir sur elle. « Alors grandirent parallèlement la maîtrise et le sentiment de la nature », explique Bernard Charbonneau⁹⁶. La Création chrétienne est donc l'une des sources de ce sentiment⁹⁷ ; mais la liberté de l'homme vis-à-vis de la nature n'a de sens qu'en acceptant la responsabilité qu'elle suppose et implique⁹⁸ ; sinon, la dialectique entre liberté et responsabilité se trouve brisée, et la liberté déchaînée n'en est plus une : telle est notre situation aujourd'hui.

La science, aux yeux de Bernard Charbonneau, est donc née de la foi en un Dieu transcendant et créateur, que l'on a appris à distinguer de la Création. Car, « que serait la Science sans la théologie franciscaine de Roger Bacon, le jansénisme de Pascal et le protestantisme de Newton ? »⁹⁹ Notre auteur nuance néanmoins quelque peu son propos : le christianisme n'est pas le seul responsable de l'exploration, de l'exploitation et de la dévastation de la nature ; cependant, sans le christianisme, le phénomène n'aurait pas pris cette ampleur ; il ne s'agit donc ni de l'accabler, ni de nier son rôle¹⁰⁰. Mais l'essentiel, pour Bernard Charbonneau, ne consiste pas à instruire un procès, à aiguïser son réquisitoire ou à affûter ses plaidoiries. Le noyau décisif de son analyse réside dans les perspectives d'ouverture pratique et par conséquent d'issue à la crise écologique :

Car cette liberté de l'homme qui menace de le détruire avec sa terre contient son antidote. C'est dans les sociétés mêmes où la science et l'individualisme issus du christianisme se sont le plus développés que le sentiment de la nature puis le mouvement écologique ont pris naissance. Ce n'est pas par hasard que Rousseau est fils de la Rome calviniste. Le côté égalitaire, pacifiste et libertaire d'un mouvement

écologique où les chrétiens plus ou moins sortis de l'Église sont nombreux est directement issu de l'Évangile¹⁰¹.

**Bernard
Charbonneau
et le
christianisme**

Bernard Charbonneau développera dans plusieurs textes cette thèse d'une ambivalence du christianisme dans son rapport à la nature : à la fois poison et contrepoison, à l'image de l'antique *pharmakôn*. Il évoque le mythe du jardin d'Éden, la condamnation des villes dans l'Ancien Testament, la splendeur de la Création rappelée à Job par Dieu, le choix de la campagne pour la prédication de Jésus, le cadre champêtre de ses paraboles, la sollicitude de Dieu envers le moindre des animaux, et il conclut : « D'où l'éveil de l'amour de la nature dans les sociétés occidentales les plus marquées par la Bible »¹⁰². Les puissances occidentales sont donc tout aussi bien les premières à s'être lancées dans l'aventure productiviste la plus échevelée, et les premières à avoir donné naissance à des mouvements de résistance contre la dévastation de la planète. C'est ce qui conduit Bernard Charbonneau à l'analyse suivante :

On voit donc que le christianisme est à la fois à l'origine du pouvoir actuel de l'homme sur la nature, et de la prise de conscience de ses conséquences négatives. D'où la nécessité pour l'opposition écologique de s'interroger sur les racines chrétiennes du développement et de sa critique, sans cela le mouvement écologiste risquera d'éclater entre un panthéisme naturiste et un progressisme technoscientifique, seulement destiné à s'intégrer dans l'évolution actuelle. (...) Le meilleur de la foi chrétienne nous rappelle que nous fûmes pétris de terre, à l'accepter et nous accepter pour ce que nous sommes : à la fois serfs et libérés de la nature. En quelque sorte le mal est fait, l'ancienne loi, celle de la crainte et de la nécessité, est abolie. Reste l'autre : mais le Christ n'a-t-il pas placé la barre trop haut pour un homme à demi *sapiens* ? C'est le seul reproche qu'on peut lui faire. À la veille de l'an 2000 comme autrefois devant l'arbre, Adam est libre. C'est-à-dire de se sauver ou de se perdre¹⁰³.

Dans un article intitulé : « Quel avenir pour quelle écologie ? »¹⁰⁴, Bernard Charbonneau reprend à nouveaux frais le débat ouvert par Lynn White en 1966 sur les responsabilités du judéo-christianisme dans la crise écologique. Il y développe son approche dialectique du problème : « La même société qui détruit avec le bison l'Indien, pleure sur sa disparition »¹⁰⁵. Les reproches que certains écologistes, comme Carl Amery, font au christianisme,

ne sont donc pas faux, mais réducteurs : en profanant la nature, le christianisme a déchaîné la volonté de connaissance et de puissance dans l'Occident post-chrétien, et c'est là que la modernité s'est développée. Mais aussi sa critique. Car la tradition chrétienne est formelle pour ce qui est de condamner l'obsession de connaître et d'exploiter. La volonté de puissance est tenue pour maléfique et destructrice, le dénuement, le refus de la puissance et de la richesse, la pauvreté pour salvateurs. Dans l'Évangile, c'est la beauté fragile du lys des champs qui est offerte en modèle à l'homme : « Le christianisme est à la fois responsable de la dévastation de la nature à l'Ouest et à l'Est, et porteur de la seule force qui puisse y mettre fin, à la fois poison et contrepoison »¹⁰⁶.

Ainsi, Bernard Charbonneau perçoit la tradition chrétienne comme un véritable *pharmakôn*, tout à la fois venin et antidote : le principal vecteur de la « Grande Mue » et sa seule issue. Le caractère paradoxal du rapport de Bernard Charbonneau au christianisme culmine dans cette analyse, et dans les ambivalences qu'elle met en exergue. Sans doute le long compagnonnage avec son ami Jacques Ellul y est-il pour quelque chose.

V. Le dialogue avec Jacques Ellul au sujet du christianisme

Les références de Bernard Charbonneau à Jacques Ellul, et de Jacques Ellul à Bernard Charbonneau, sont relativement rares. Et cependant, nous savons que leur amitié fidèle, longue de près de soixante ans, n'a pas pu ne pas avoir d'impact sur la pensée de l'un comme sur celle de l'autre. Bernard Charbonneau évoque cette relation en ces termes : après la Seconde Guerre mondiale, « je prenais conscience de l'origine chrétienne de mon amour de la nature et de la liberté. D'où une communion de pensée plus étroite qu'avant-guerre »¹⁰⁷. Quant à Jacques Ellul, il témoigne en ce sens : « Dès le début, nous nous sommes opposés, parfois très durement, dans le domaine de la foi »¹⁰⁸. Mais il reconnaît

l'influence décisive de mon ami Charbonneau. Il a été à la fois le reproche incarné de ce que je ne suivais pas, en tant que chrétien, le commandement impérieux : « Il faut faire quelque chose », et un coup d'œil critique : « Ce que tu fais ne signifie rien ». J'ai tenté de faire échapper la foi chrétienne à ses critiques par mes engagements¹⁰⁹.

Il serait judicieux de relire en parallèle *Je fus*¹¹⁰ et *Quatre témoins de la liberté*¹¹¹, et la trilogie ellulienne sur la liberté (*Le Vouloir et le Faire*¹¹², *Éthique de la liberté*¹¹³ et *Les combats de la liberté*¹¹⁴) ; *Prométhée réenchaîné*¹¹⁵ et la trilogie ellulienne sur la révolution (*Autopsie de la révolution*¹¹⁶, *De la révolution aux révoltes*¹¹⁷ et *Changer de révolution*¹¹⁸) ; *L'État*¹¹⁹ et *L'illusion politique*¹²⁰ ; *Dimanche et lundi*¹²¹ et *Pour qui, pour quoi travaillons-nous ?*¹²² ; *Il court, il court, le fric...*¹²³ et *L'homme et l'argent*¹²⁴ ; *Le totalitarisme industriel*¹²⁵ et *Le bluff technologique*¹²⁶ ; et enfin les articles sur l'écologie rédigés en alternance, ou en écho, dans *Combat Nature* entre 1983 et 1985¹²⁷. Les tensions et les recoupements seraient ainsi repérés et problématisés.

Parmi moult thématiques communes, on pourrait indiquer : la disqualification de la ville dans l'Ancien Testament¹²⁸ ; la tension entre Vérité et Réalité¹²⁹ (mais le binôme se trouve sécularisé dans la conscience humaine) ; la nécessité de profaner l'idole automobile¹³⁰ (mais par la poésie, et non par la foi dans le Dieu de Jésus-Christ) ; la tension entre révolte et révolution¹³¹, et leur récupération par l'État¹³² ; vraie et fausse présences du chrétien au monde¹³³ (mais Bernard Charbonneau ironise sur la présence qui se double d'une bien commode absence par appartenance à un autre monde) ; le caractère décisif du choix d'un style de vie¹³⁴ (mais que notre auteur ne qualifie pas de spécifiquement chrétien) ; l'absence de morale chrétienne¹³⁵ (mais Bernard Charbonneau s'empresse d'ajouter, sans doute en réponse implicite à Jacques Ellul, que la créature ne s'y retrouve plus) ; la tension entre parole et image¹³⁶ ; la trahison du Christ par les chrétiens, et la nécessaire subversion de la société par l'anarchisme évangélique¹³⁷.

Mon hypothèse est la suivante : c'est ce dialogue sans fard mené sur plus d'un demi-siècle par un chrétien confessant, converti brutalement à seize ans après avoir grandi hors de tout climat religieux, et un agnostique post-chrétien marqué par une éducation chrétienne et fort érudit en la matière, qui explique en grande partie la radicalité de leurs positions respectives sur la question de la foi chrétienne. Le chiasme que constitue le croisement de leurs itinéraires intellectuels et de leurs cheminements spirituels respectifs s'avère à ce propos révélateur. Ce serait notamment l'insistance de Bernard Charbonneau pour que son ami rende compte des errements du christianisme qui éclairerait la vigueur corrosive de *La subversion du christianisme*¹³⁸. De même, l'attestation résolue, jusqu'à l'outrance, d'un Jacques Ellul en

faveur de l'exclusivisme chrétien en matière de liberté authentique, jetterait une lumière nouvelle sur la tension incisive propre à *Je fus*¹³⁹, ainsi qu'entre *Je fus* et *Quatre témoins de la liberté*¹⁴⁰. La dialectique n'aurait ainsi pas seulement joué à l'intérieur de chacune des deux œuvres, mais entre elles, et entre nos deux auteurs, sous les modalités d'une fécondation mutuelle.

Conclusion

Il est temps de conclure. Les références, parfois explicites mais généralement implicites, au corpus scripturaire et à la tradition chrétienne, foisonnent dans la pensée de Bernard Charbonneau, et sont égrenées tout au long de son œuvre. Elles peuvent être mises au service d'une analyse historique ou socioreligieuse, mais le plus souvent, aux côtés de références à la mythologie antique, à la littérature ou à l'histoire politique du monde entier, se trouvent détournées de leur signification originelle pour illustrer une autre idée, sur un mode humoristique ou sarcastique, dans le style inimitable de leur auteur.

La critique charbonnienne du christianisme se décline selon diverses modalités : critique impitoyable de la théologie de Teilhard de Chardin, en pointant ses velléités totalitaires, mais aussi en se plaçant (par stratégie ou par conviction) sur le terrain de l'argumentation théologique la plus orthodoxe ; vifs reproches envers les falsifications du message du Christ par les chrétiens au cours de l'histoire, et notamment envers le conformisme technophile, voire technolâtre, de l'Église catholique au XXe siècle ; griefs plus radicaux adressés au christianisme en tant que tel, dans ses contradictions, son hypocrisie, ou son besoin permanent de justification ; enfin, critique du phénomène religieux en général, dans sa dimension sociale, et du fait même de son caractère sociologique substantiel qui porte irrémédiablement atteinte à la liberté de penser. Bernard Charbonneau déploie de ce fait un positionnement agnostique foncièrement individualiste, qui n'exclut cependant pas (mais il s'agit moins d'une contradiction que d'un paradoxe, voire d'une conséquence logique de l'agnosticisme) l'hypothèse de travail « Dieu ».

En parallèle à cette critique, notre auteur s'emploie à faire l'éloge du christianisme. Il lui sait gré d'avoir proposé aux hommes des principes d'une

extrême exigence (peut-être d'une exigence excessive, ce qui est à la fois vice et vertu, ou plus exactement ce qui révèle les vices de ses vertus). Mais sa gratitude envers le christianisme tient essentiellement à l'héritage de liberté qu'il lui reconnaît : il s'agit là d'un trésor inestimable offert à l'humanité. Aussi Bernard Charbonneau oscille-t-il entre une conception sécularisée de la liberté, dont la source serait purement subjective et autonome, et une version christocentrée qui surgit dans ses tout derniers textes.

Le regard que Bernard Charbonneau porte sur le christianisme est fondamentalement dialectique : que ce soit pour la pensée, la nourriture, ou tout spécialement le rapport à la nature, le christianisme lui semble être d'un caractère ambivalent, poison et antidote, à l'instar de l'antique *pharmakôn*. Il exhorte donc les mouvements écologistes à assumer les ressources proprement chrétiennes de leur engagement, car il ne voit pas d'autres issues à la crise que, paradoxalement, la même tradition chrétienne a déclenchée.

Il est plus que probable que ce regard subtil et complexe porté sur le christianisme, conçu comme une réalité dialectique, soit en grande partie débiteur du long compagnonnage que Bernard Charbonneau entretint avec Jacques Ellul. Leur estime réciproque n'empêche pas en effet, et même autorisa plutôt, de vives disputes à l'endroit de la foi chrétienne. Tout se passe comme si les positions opposées des deux hommes, produits d'un croisement biographique saisissant, aient incité chacun, dans un dialogue permanent et sans fard, à affiner sa réflexion et son argumentaire, au prix, sinon d'insignes radicalisations, du moins d'incontestables déplacements.

En fin de compte, il me semble possible de discerner dans les rapports entre Bernard Charbonneau et le christianisme une configuration inédite : celle d'une reconfiguration ininterrompue, en raison des déterminations familiales, de la révélation du sens de la nature et de la liberté par le truchement du scoutisme protestant, des aléas d'un cheminement existentiel et de diverses fortunes et infortunes éditoriales, du génie personnel propre à l'auteur, et enfin, *last but not least*, de la fidélité et de l'amitié.

Notes

1. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, Paris, L'Échappée (coll. Le pas de côté), 2019, p. 86–87.

2. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions. Écologie, régionalisme et sociétés locales*, Paris, Le Sang de la terre (coll. Les dossiers de l'écologie), 1991, p. 164.
3. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 23.
4. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Un festin pour Tantale. Nourriture et société industrielle* [1997], Paris, Le Sang de la terre (coll. La pensée écologique), 2011², p. 78.
5. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 107, 111.
6. Bernard Charbonneau, *Lexique du verbe quotidien*, Genève, Éditions Héros-Limite (coll. Feuilles d'herbe), 2016, p. 68. Cf. aussi Bernard Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*, Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon), 2001, p. 227.
7. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 91.
8. Bernard Charbonneau, *Comment ne pas penser*, Bordeaux, Opales, 2004, p. 105.
9. Cf. Jean 1, 14.
10. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone* [1969], Paris, Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des nuisances, 2002², p. 79.
11. Bernard Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*, *op. cit.*, p. 124.
12. Cf. Jean 14, 6.
13. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'hommauto* [1967], Paris, Denoël, 2003², p. 106.
14. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus. Essai sur la liberté* [1980], Bordeaux, Opales, 2000², p. 105.
15. Cf. Matthieu 10, 34.
16. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 96.
17. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, La Bache, À plus d'un titre éditions (coll. La ligne d'horizon), 2010, p. 126.
18. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
19. Cf. Jean 3, 8.
20. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'hommauto*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
22. Cf. Matthieu 4, 4 ; Luc 4, 4.
23. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.*, p. 165.
24. 1 Corinthiens 1, 23.
25. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

26. Cf. Psaume 42, 2–3.
27. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
28. Cf. Jean 3, 5.
29. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
30. Cf. Jean 3, 23.
31. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.
32. Cf. Matthieu 8, 22.
33. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'homme en son temps et en son lieu* [1960], Paris, R&N Éditions, 2017², p. 36.
34. Cf. Matthieu 5, 17.
35. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'homme en son temps et en son lieu*, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
36. Cf. Josué 10, 12–14.
37. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, *op. cit.*, p. 80.
38. Cf. Luc 15, 11–32.
39. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 190.
40. Cf. Matthieu 22, 21.
41. Bernard Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric...*, Bordeaux, Opales, 1996, p. 35.
42. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté. Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski*, Paris, R&N Éditions, 2019, p. 46.
43. Cf. Matthieu 16, 26 ; Marc 8, 36 ; Luc 9, 25.
44. Bernard Charbonneau, *Lexique du verbe quotidien*, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
45. Bernard Charbonneau, *Notre table rase. Essai*, Paris, Denoël, 1974, p. 205.
46. Cf. Josué 6, 20.
47. Bernard Charbonneau, *Notre table rase*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
48. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Teilhard de Chardin, prophète d'un âge totalitaire*, Paris, Denoël, 1963.
49. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 8.
50. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 22–24.
51. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 62.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 86.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
56. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.
57. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric...*, *op. cit.*, p. 39.
58. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'hommauto*, *op. cit.*, p. 130.
59. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, *op. cit.*, p. 122, 140 ; *Un festin pour Tantale*, *op. cit.*, p. 136–37 ; *Sauver nos régions*, *op. cit.*, p. 95.
60. Bernard Charbonneau, *Notre table rase*, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
61. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
62. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Dimanche et lundi. Essai*, Paris, Denoël, 1966, p. 21–34.
63. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, *op. cit.*, p. 84–85.
64. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le changement*, Vierzon, Le Pas de côté, 2013, p. 14–15. La parole du Christ : « Si le grain ne meurt... » (Jean 12, 24) est ici convoquée à grande distance de sa signification dans le contexte évangélique de son énonciation.
65. Genèse 1, 28.
66. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
67. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions*, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
68. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.*, p. 176–78, 195–98, 204.
69. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Comment ne pas penser*, *op. cit.*, p. 21–34.
70. Cf. par exemple Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 239 (la liberté y est qualifiée comme étant le don soit de la nature, soit d'un Dieu inconnu). Cf. aussi Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, *op. cit.*, p. 152.
71. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, *op. cit.*, p. 289. Cf. aussi Bernard Charbonneau, *Notre table rase*, *op. cit.*, p. 192.
72. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, *op. cit.*, p. 288.
73. Bernard Charbonneau, *Bien aimer sa maman*, Bordeaux, Opales, 2006, p. 56.
74. *Ibid.*, p. 58–59.
75. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
76. Matthieu 5, 44.

77. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel, op. cit.*, p. 100. Notre auteur ajoute : « “Aimez-vous les uns les autres” n’est pas une vérité scientifique » (*ibid.*, p. 110).
78. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert. Autocritique du mouvement écologique* [1980], Lyon, Parangon/Vs (coll. L’après-développement), 2009², p. 86. Cf. aussi Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel, op. cit.*, p. 108.
79. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 52.
80. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus, op. cit.*, p. 212.
81. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
82. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone, op. cit.*, p. 251.
83. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae, op. cit.*, p. 253–54.
84. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus, op. cit.*, p. 204.
85. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
86. *Ibid.*, p. 224.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
88. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
89. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté, op. cit.*
90. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
91. *Ibid.*, p. 138–39.
92. Bernard Charbonneau, *Comment ne pas penser, op. cit.*, p. 22.
93. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
94. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Un festin pour Tantale, op. cit.*, p. 98.
95. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 100.
96. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone, op. cit.*, p. 10.
97. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 20.
98. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 25.
99. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae, op. cit.*, p. 185.
100. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert, op. cit.*, p. 88–89.
101. *Ibid.*, p. 87–88.
102. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel, op. cit.*, p. 107.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 108.
104. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, « Quel avenir pour quelle écologie ? », *Foi & Vie*, 37, n°3–4, juillet 1988, p. 129–38.
105. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
106. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
107. Bernard Charbonneau, « Unis par une pensée commune », *Foi & Vie*, 93, n°5–6, décembre 1994, p. 19–28 (ici p. 23).
108. Jacques Ellul, *À temps et à contretemps. Entretiens avec Madeleine Garrigou-La-grange*, Paris, Le Centurion (coll. Les interviews), 1981, p. 66.
109. *Ibid.*, p. 65–66.
110. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.*
111. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, *op. cit.*
112. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Le Vouloir et le Faire. Une critique théologique de la morale* [1964], Genève, Labor et Fides, 2013² ; *Les sources de l'éthique chrétienne. Le Vouloir et le Faire, parties IV et V*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2018.
113. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté* [1973, 1975], Genève, Labor et Fides, 2019².
114. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Les combats de la liberté*, Paris / Genève, Le Centurion / Labor et Fides, 1984. Cf. aussi Jacques Ellul, *Vivre et penser la liberté*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2019.
115. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*, *op. cit.*
116. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Autopsie de la révolution* [1969], Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°312), 2008².
117. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *De la révolution aux révoltes* [1972], Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°345), 2011².
118. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution. L'inéluctable prolétariat* [1982], Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°405), 2015².
119. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'État* [1949], Paris, R&N Éditions, 2020³.
120. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *L'illusion politique* [1965], Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°214), 2004³.
121. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Dimanche et lundi*, *op. cit.*
122. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Pour qui, pour quoi travaillons-nous ?*, Paris, La Table Ronde (coll. La petite Vermillon n°379), 2013.

123. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric...*, *op. cit.*
124. Cf. Jacques Ellul, « L'homme et l'argent » [1954], in *Le défi et le nouveau. Œuvres théologiques 1948–1991*, Paris, La Table Ronde, 2007³, p. 199–345.
125. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*
126. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *Le bluff technologique* [1988], Paris, Hachette (coll. Pluriel), 2012³.
127. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, « La nature et la liberté, fondements du mouvement écologique », in *Combat Nature*, n°54, jan.–fév. 1983, p. 14–15 ; Jacques Ellul, « La responsabilité du christianisme dans la nature et la liberté », n°54, jan.–fév. 1983, p. 16–17 ; BC, « Sexualité et famille », n°55, mars–avr. 1983, p. 12–13 ; JE, « Croissance démographique et société de masse », n°55, mars–avr. 1983, p. 13–14 ; BC, « Écologie et agriculture », n°56, mai–juin 1983, p. 16–17 ; JE, « L'absurde économique », n°56, mai–juin 1983, p. 17–18 ; BC, « Défendre les sociétés locales contre le centralisme économique », n°57, août 1983, p. 20–21 ; JE, « La classe politique », n°57, août 1983, p. 21–22 ; JE, « Relations internationales : l'imbroglia », n°58, oct. 1983, p. 11–12 ; BC, « Guerre et guerre nucléaire », n°58, oct. 1983, p. 12–13 ; JE, « Les contradictions de la communication », n°59, déc. 1983, p. 15 ; BC, « Accélération des transports et consommation de l'espace », n°59, déc. 1983, p. 16 ; JE, « Crise de la culture, un exemple : l'art contemporain », n°60, fév. 1984, p. 23–24 ; BC, « Masse, éducation et culture de masse », n°60, fév. 1984, p. 25–26 ; JE, « Sciences, technique, désordres », n°61, mai 1984, p. 19–20 ; JE, « Qu'est-ce que la technique ? », n°61, mai 1984, p. 20 ; BC, « Vers un désordre total », n°61, mai 1984, p. 21–22 ; BC, « Écologie et menaces de guerre nucléaire », n°61, mai 1984, p. 23 ; JE, « L'incertitude de la science », n°65, août 1984, p. 32–33 ; BC, « Vers un meilleur des mondes », n°65, août 1984, p. 34–35 ; JE, « L'idéologie de l'intérêt privé et l'idéologie de l'intérêt public », n°66, nov. 1984, p. 37–38 ; BC, « L'écologie ni de droite ni de gauche », n°66, nov. 1984, p. 38–39 ; JE, « Conclusion sous forme de thèses », n°67, fév. 1985, p. 22–23 ; BC, « Nécessité de l'impossible », n°67, fév. 1985, p. 24.
128. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
129. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Teilhard de Chardin, prophète d'un âge totalitaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
130. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'homme auto*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.
131. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*, *op. cit.*, p. 13–14, 272, 310–11.

132. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 28–29, 31, 197–98, 279–81, 287–88, 320–22. Notre auteur ose même ironiser en ces termes : « Bientôt, pour faire la Révolution, il faudra demander des subventions » (Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert*, *op. cit.*, p. 151).
133. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Teilhard de Chardin, prophète d'un âge totalitaire*, *op. cit.*, p. 90 ; *Comment ne pas penser*, *op. cit.*, p. 27.
134. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, *op. cit.*, p. 258.
135. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
136. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert*, *op. cit.*, p. 179 (un an avant la publication de *La parole humiliée* : cf. Jacques Ellul, *La parole humiliée* [1981], Paris, La Table Ronde [coll. La petite Vermillon n°391], 2014²).
137. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert*, *op. cit.*, p. 85 (quatre ans avant la publication de *La subversion du christianisme* : cf. Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme* [1984], Paris, La Table Ronde [coll. La petite Vermillon n°145], 2011³ ; et huit ans avant celle d'*Anarchie et christianisme* : cf. Jacques Ellul, *Anarchie et christianisme* [1988], Paris, La Table Ronde [coll. La petite Vermillon n°96], 2018³).
138. Cf. Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme*, *op. cit.*
139. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus*, *op. cit.*
140. Cf. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, *op. cit.*

Bernard Charbonneau and Christianity

Frédéric Rognon

Bernard Charbonneau's relationship to Christian faith is anything but simple and one-sided. Having grown up in a Christian milieu (his father was Protestant and his mother Catholic) and experienced the Protestant Scout movement (from age ten to sixteen), which would prove crucial to his sensibility to nature and freedom, he would describe himself as agnostic and post-Christian, while reciting the "Our Father" every day until the end of his life. Moreover, his work is rife with biblical references and allusions to Christian tradition, which he knows very well, probably more than many believers, alternating respectful, even laudatory, mentions and sharp criticisms. Finally, it is impossible to grasp the nature of the affinities and differences between Bernard Charbonneau and Christianity without factoring in his dealings with Jacques Ellul. It is known that the two friends, united for over sixty years "by a common thought," differed on many issues, including that of Christian faith, and engaged about this one in an ongoing *disputatio* that was enabled solely by mutual esteem and boundless mutual gratitude.

I therefore propose to throw some light on the paradoxical relationship between Charbonneau and Christianity by examining in turn: 1) the Christian references, implicit and explicit, 2) the critique of Christianity, 3) the praise of Christianity, 4) the thesis of the ambivalence of Christianity in relation to nature, and finally 5) the dialogue with Ellul about Christianity.

I. Bernard Charbonneau's References to the Bible and to Christian Tradition

An inventory of motifs drawn from scriptural, symbolic, and theological corpuses in all his work should allow us to take stock of references to Christianity in Charbonneau's thought and to attempt to work out the variegated status of Christian faith and tradition in his existential positioning.

Bernard Charbonneau's references to the Bible and to the Christian tradition are numerous and are generally used either as objects of historical analysis or as examples, at the price of a semantic displacement, of a re-configuration or a distortion of meaning. We will cite only a few, as some examples among hundreds, by beginning with explicit references and continuing with implicit references.

A. *Explicit references* (only rarely does Charbonneau give a precise Scripture reference):

- The Eternal's wrath against the numbering of Israel and Judah, as related in 2 Samuel 24, is applied to computerization.¹
- An omen of the death of King Belshazzar in the prophetic book of Daniel is applied to the mystique of development at any cost² (exceptionally, Charbonneau resorts to a footnote to make explicit a biblical quotation called up in support of his demonstration).
- Verses drawn from the tower of Babel episode in Genesis 11 exemplify the totalitarian threat against freedom.³
- In a paean to tasty food, an explicit reference to the First Epistle to the Corinthians reminds readers that the Apostle Paul freed Christians from dietary taboos.⁴
- And when it comes to showing how God is distinct from material omnipotence, Charbonneau multiplies biblical references as footnotes.⁵

B. *Implicit references* (more generally, Charbonneau merely alludes to a biblical motif, which raises an issue of readability and understanding for generations completely cut off from any familiarity with scriptural tradition, especially when the biblical message's meaning is altered):

- Charbonneau hazards a suggestive parallel between Charlie Chaplin and Jesus. We throw gold at Charlie Chaplin, this pauper we have made rich: “Incidentally, the same misadventure happened to someone else. To be sure, he was more redoubtable; for before covering his image in gold and offering it to the public’s admiration in vast halls, we had securely nailed it to a cross.”⁶
- In his critique of science, Charbonneau quotes this saying from an “underdeveloped Semite”: “Love one another,” commenting, “I don’t think he discovered this principle using a radio telescope.”⁷
- About Napoleon: “Matter became flesh,”⁸ implicitly referring to the prologue of John.⁹
- About peasants: “In them the Word has forever become incarnate,”¹⁰ referring to the same text.
- About the home: “Where else would we find life, truth, and the way?,”¹¹ altering the meaning of Jesus’ formula in his last conversations with his disciples.¹²
- The same reference is implicit about the car: “The car is truth and life, but especially the Way, to which everything must be sacrificed, and human sacrifice is the highest of all.”¹³
- About freedom: it “does not bring peace, but the sword,”¹⁴ alluding to the expression Jesus uses about himself.¹⁵
- The same expression is called upon about science: “It did not come to bring peace, but the sword, which it constantly improves.”¹⁶
- It is also called upon in acknowledging that any religious imperative can only exhort men to overcome their own nature by a kind of spiritual violence.¹⁷
- About the spirit: “No one knows where the one who falls for having obeyed it goes nor whence he comes,”¹⁸ referring to the Holy Spirit in the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus.¹⁹
- The same reference is called upon about the car: “The ideal car is the Holy Spirit, who comes and goes as he wills.”²⁰

- And again, about the car: “It is said that automan will not live by Premium alone,”²¹ alluding to Jesus’ retort to the tempter, according to which man will not live by bread alone.²²
- Freedom is said to be “folly for the flesh, a scandal for the mind,”²³ a total reconfiguration of the verse that preached the crucified Christ, “a scandal to Jews and folly for the pagans.”²⁴
- “As a thirsty deer pants,” “man is thirsty for truth,”²⁵ says Charbonneau, quoting Psalm 42, which was about the soul of the psalmist thirsting for the living God.²⁶
- The same reference is called upon in a heartfelt paean to water, so as to establish that water is not just a source of physical life, but of spiritual life, and that all religious traditions yearn for the stream that will at last slake their thirst.²⁷
- In the same plea for a return to water purity, our author quotes Jesus’ words to Nicodemus²⁸: “Unless a man is born of water and spirit, he will not enter the Kingdom of God,”²⁹ and the better to denounce water pollution, it is with reference to the baptism of John the Baptist near Salim³⁰ that he dramatically announces that the Jordan might today turn to blood.³¹
- In denouncing man’s new relationship to the earth, Charbonneau subverts and extends Christ’s formula³² to say that “we no longer let the dead bury the dead, we dig them up.”³³
- Substituting man, space and time, for the law,³⁴ our author evokes nostalgia for a realm where “space and time, man, would not be abolished, but accomplished.”³⁵
- By recalling the episode where Joshua halted the course of the sun,³⁶ Charbonneau puts a biblical reference at the service of an Epicurean impulse, stating that we can slow time down by being present to oneself, the neighbor, and the universe.³⁷
- In order to dramatically display the relations of ingratitude between man and nature, it is the parable of the prodigal son³⁸ that is recalled: “It is nature that spawned this prodigal son who disowns it, and he

remains bound to it as far as his physical and even spiritual existence is concerned.”³⁹

- In his critique of the idolatry of money, Charbonneau does not hesitate to subvert the Gospel expression about the taxes due to the emperor,⁴⁰ by declaring, “It sometimes happens that we must render unto Rothschild what belongs to Caesar. That gives you an idea of what is left for God.”⁴¹
- The same biblical reference appears in the critique of the State and of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “How do we render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar without rendering unto him a little of what belongs to God, sovereign of all?”⁴²
- And in a critique of the technological surge, Charbonneau cites Jesus’ statement creating a tension between the world and the soul,⁴³ to update it and extend its meditation: “‘What would it serve a man to win the world if he destroyed or lost himself?’ And we know today that he may well lose the world by losing himself.”⁴⁴
- The last lines of *Notre table rase* [Our Tabula Rasa] associate an anonymized statement by Luther (summoned to retract himself before the Diet of Worms in 1521): “I cannot do anything else . . . ,”⁴⁵ that our author takes up to legitimize his commitment and that of his reader toward the earth, in implicit reference to the walls of Jericho⁴⁶: “When this trumpet tune sounds, sometimes the walls crumble,”⁴⁷ so as to give his reader some hope in that commitment’s efficacy.

These examples show the recurrence and the variety of—mostly implicit—biblical and theological references in Charbonneau’s body of work. We must now give a more systematic account of the direct critique of Christianity developed by our author.

II. Charbonneau’s Critique of Christianity

The first book published by Bernard Charbonneau is a ruthless deconstruction of one of the theological icons at the time and of his mythology: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁴⁸ The key reproach he states against the latter’s thought is the threat it poses to freedom: Teilhard de Chardin has built a

closed system, turned towards the whole and the absolute.⁴⁹ For any contradiction is destined to be resolved at a higher level, the world finally becoming one in God.⁵⁰ Teilhard de Chardin thus assumes God's viewpoint.⁵¹ All things are therefore reconciled in a great divine whole; all that is left for the Church is to consecrate the world's reality, by simply adding God's name to it: Christian socialism, Christian cinema, . . . why not Christian concentration camps? "The noun no longer belongs to Christianity, all that is left to it is the adjective."⁵² This typically Kierkegaardian critique implicitly suggests the legitimacy of Christian alternatives to Teilhard de Chardin. Charbonneau also does not hesitate to formulate a theological critique that is eminently orthodox in tenor, thus hunting down the internal contradictions of Teilhard's thought on its own turf: "If in this system Evil is no longer Evil, the Cross is no longer the Cross."⁵³ Now, Death was vanquished on the Cross, and "Christ commanded us to acknowledge we are sinners"⁵⁴ (let us note the inclusive "we" under our author's pen):

Since Evil is inessential, Redemption becomes superfluous: what place can the Cross have in Progress? [...] Christ's sacrifice loses its price, and the Christian's life its weightiness. There is no longer any salvation, because there is no longer any loss. Nothing can prevent the total triumph of the Good.⁵⁵

The first critique of Christianity is thus the critique of a certain theology in the name of Christianity. It then widens to include Protestant Puritanism on one side, and Catholicism as a whole on the other. The Puritan hatred of man's sinful nature is absent from the Gospel,⁵⁶ thunders Charbonneau, again taking care, as a faithful Kierkegaardian, to distinguish the Christian source from its subversion by Christendom. The cult of money denounced by Christianity (i.e., in New Testament texts) obviously rules Christian society.⁵⁷ And since the end of the Second World War, the Churches, having missed the steamboat, "are too afraid of missing the gas-propelled boat. The old theology denied the machine, the new one blesses it: a sprinkle from the aspergillum will give Total an odor of holy water."⁵⁸ The elimination of agriculture and the countryside plays out with the support of the Catholic Church, hoping that this way people are going to forget its compromising involvement in the Vichy regime's "back to the land."⁵⁹ Thus is verified in every period Catholicism's propensity to conform to the dominant order.

Surviving Churches have given too many proofs of their lack of imagination and of “their cowardice before the industrial world.”⁶⁰

But Bernard Charbonneau’s grievances toward Christianity become sharper, more substantial, more basic. Among other things, he points out how biblical texts seem to say everything and its opposite.⁶¹ The Christian understanding of work, for instance, wavers between a curse and salvation⁶²: earning one’s bread by the sweat of one’s brow is thus experienced as a blessed curse, since it was inflicted by God.⁶³ Moreover, change for change’s sake is seen as a value on account of Christianity, which is at the root of the West’s anxiety and agitation: Christian life is a conversion, a permanent mutation.⁶⁴ Likewise, the call to “Grow and multiply!,”⁶⁵ justifying exponential growth, bothers Charbonneau: “What is the deity or nature that imposed this fate on man?,”⁶⁶ when to grow means to perish. Christian hypocrisy has “polluted” the word “love.”⁶⁷ Graver still, our author holds against Christianity that it calls freedom into question: the Christian is the man of good conscience, of denial of death, of spiritual and therefore social conformity, and finally of justification, which dispenses with changing the world and oneself; but freedom is the refusal of any justification.⁶⁸ And finally, in *Comment ne pas penser* [How to Not Think], Bernard Charbonneau presents Christianity as the second (after navel-gazing) of sixteen cures against the propensity to think.⁶⁹ The main grievance deployed against it is its indulgence toward history: “God is love”: this is very convenient, and makes it possible to justify all the works of men, down to the atom bomb. If there is a Christian bank, why not also a Gestapo . . . ? “Blessed are the poor”: the poor find in this an eminent dignity, while billionaires will not be bothered by it. Christianity has been much maligned, adds Charbonneau, by those who accuse it of causing trouble in society; actually, the damage is far less than it might seem at first glance. And our author then adds sarcastically: today’s world entirely demonstrates that Christianity, far from causing trouble, has only brought to the highest pitch the human ability for self-defense against thought. And yet, in a robustly dialectical reasoning, Bernard Charbonneau notes that Christianity offers at once the disease and its best cure, thought and non-thought, the poison and the counterpoison. We will find this ambivalence again about Christianity’s relationship to nature.

Charbonneau's critique of Christianity culminates in a profession of agnostic faith. Charbonneau often mentions an "unknown God."⁷⁰ And yet, the Nietzschean assertion of the death of God occurs even more frequently in his work. This statement of fact is always oriented toward the discovery of a new creativity, of almost divine provenance, in oneself: "God is dead?—He wouldn't be the first nor the last one. Let him rise again in us! If your cry is strong enough, perhaps he will hear it up there."⁷¹ It is in a mode of utter paradox that Charbonneau thus extolls human responsibility, without for all that excluding the God hypothesis. "It is in oneself that the source resides,"⁷² he declares in denying there might be any point in simply changing one's religion, going from Christianity to Buddhism or vice versa.

Finally, the critique of Christianity widens into a critique of any religion and of the religious phenomenon as such. His denunciation becomes more caustic when it comes to pointing to the ravages of religion as a collective phenomenon: when it becomes identified with society, it proves harmful, for "people in the aggregate persuade each other."⁷³ And Bernard Charbonneau multiplies sarcasms, to highlight society's mothering function: "Mummy is pious, but does she have the faith? I doubt it. If no one is as devout as she, there is also no greater sceptic. [...] She does better than kill God [...], she gives him a proper Church burial."⁷⁴ "Society has always fed bodies and minds, needing to bind bodies in order to bind souls. [...] For centuries, Saint Mummy has been deceiving her baby's spiritual thirst by making it confuse a shadow with substance."⁷⁵

Charbonneau's critique of Christianity, as a religion rather than as a faith, thus proves a radical one. And yet, it finds a counterpoint in no less eloquent praise.

III. Charbonneau's Praise for Christianity

Bernard Charbonneau robustly salutes Christianity's contribution in several areas close to his heart. The first one is its highlighting of life principles that had been forgotten or neglected by science, whose conceits they come down to questioning. It is of course the case of love: "Love your enemies"⁷⁶ has hardly been proven by practice and history, and in this sense it is not a scientific truth; "but it is not 'E = mc²' or the double helix that are going to

give meaning to our life.”⁷⁷ Christ’s exhortations are thus not to be received at a demonstrative level but as an orientation of existence. The only thing our author holds against “pure Christianity” (after all the sharp grievances we have presented above, no doubt aimed at parodies of Christianity) is its extreme demands; the law of love he sees as too far above man’s level⁷⁸: doesn’t this critique sound more like beautiful praise? This general celebration of Christianity’s principles is supplemented by a few positive valuations of Protestantism, such as its justified critique of waste and thus its sense of the responsibilities bound up with our lifestyles.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, Christianity’s main virtue in Bernard Charbonneau’s eyes has to do with its invention of freedom. Our author says it plainly:

If freedom is to be dated, it is from the year A.D. 1. Only a God could create the new man. To divinize in this way not Man but the one who lives and dies every day, it was necessary that God become human: that divine spirit become incarnate in a body and that the Father’s love be nailed on his son’s cross.⁸⁰

This analysis leads our author to be so bold as to assert the close bond between the biblical God and freedom:

What is God? The Absolute, Perfection? How could a man, finite and imperfect, know these? At least in this Far West, we know only one thing: it is that God is someone; and that, victim or judge, he will judge persons in person. It is not pure Freedom, but this living and mortal freedom, that once perished and triumphed: one Friday in the year 33, somewhere to the northeast of Kedron. As the structure of our religion, this freedom is that of our justice.⁸¹

Contrary to appearances, this is not a confession of faith but a rigorous examination of the Christian inheritance in the West. To begin with, Charbonneau brings some nuance to his assessment by specifying that free man is born of the meeting between Judaeo-Christianity and Greek tradition.⁸² Then, he shows that it is less freedom itself than the demand for freedom that was taken to its highest pitch by the Christian faith in a transcendent God.⁸³ Finally, the central message of *Je fus* [I Was] is that this demand can be honored only by revealing it in oneself and for oneself, without any justification, refusing in particular the one that is done in the name of freedom.⁸⁴ Now, we have seen how justification was precisely the mark of the

Christian. Only individual, radically subjective existence can be a free existence, with all the tragic and anxious tenor that this experience implies: “Outside of yourself you will find nothing but the void to be crossed by your step. Alas! you alone can take it. There is no such thing as liberty, only a liberation, and above all a liberator.”⁸⁵ “Incarnation has but one locus, one author: you. If you say it yourself, you will say: me.”⁸⁶ “If freedom is a challenge uttered to heaven and earth, I am this challenge.”⁸⁷ The last page of *Je fus*, while it confirms this irreducibility of free existence to any outside authority, still recovers a more dialectical tone:

Choose your freedom, stop justifying yourself for doing it. There is still time; you are still alive on earth. No one can do it in your place; neither Nature that has no spirit save for your own, nor God who, if he exists, wants you free in his own image.⁸⁸

Freedom is thus at once the experience of absolute singularity and the echo of a God hypothesis that is never totally dismissed, still less disputed.

One of Bernard Charbonneau’s very last writings, entitled *Quatre témoins de la liberté* [Four Witnesses to Freedom]: Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski,⁸⁹ published twenty-three years after his death, seems to inflect his thought in a distinctly Christological direction. It would be very instructive to compare this final title with *Je fus*, devoted to the same theme of freedom but, as we have just seen, with a quite different approach, in an agnostic vein. About Berdiaev, our author shows how close is the proximity he feels to his thought, before adding,

were it not for the Christian faith loudly touted by Berdiaev, which a post-Christian unbeliever has no reason to dispute. For Berdiaev’s faith is first and foremost the power that moves his thought along its path and helps him go beyond some false dilemmas of right and left in which other Christians get mired.⁹⁰

The reference to Berdiaev appears to make a transition between the last lines of *Je fus* and those of *Quatre témoins*,⁹¹ devoted to Dostoyevsky:

Christian freedom is not a truth one possesses, a solution given in advance [...]. Are we up to converting to the call of a God of freedom without being sustained by the faith—which is humanly speaking a belief—in a God-man? Is this possible, in a time that is

stuck between the death of God and the religious anxiety that still troubles our species?⁹²

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At the sunset of his life, could it be that Charbonneau allowed himself to be won over by Christianity's unequalled relevance for opening a genuine path of freedom?

As always with Bernard Charbonneau, things are not that simple. Rather than a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, it would be better to discern in him a dialectical relationship to Christianity, powerfully buttressed by the analysis of the latter's fundamentally ambivalent character. This paradoxical dimension of Christianity, which calls for a paradoxical relationship with it, manifests with special clarity in its ties to nature.

IV. The Thesis of Christianity's Ambivalence in Relation to Nature

As a religion of paradox, Christianity maintains ambivalent relations with many objects other than nature. Here are two examples. With thought, which Christianity produces as much as non-thought, as we have seen: Jesus Christ "refers at once to the essence of the disease and to the best cure against it."⁹³ "We owe to Christianity, at the same time as a worsening of the disease of thought, a deepening of the reflexes that defend us against it."⁹⁴ Second example of ambivalence, and even of trivalence: food. According to Charbonneau, the rejection of the Jews' dietary formalism could lead Christians as much to overindulgence, to indifference, as to the liberation of the spirit.⁹⁵ Thus, the Christian revolution still has multivocal effects on current behavior patterns. Our author then refines his analysis, in decidedly stimulating fashion: the absence of dietary orthodoxy within Christianity has paradoxically led to the multiplication of orthodoxies in the post-Christian West, ranging from contempt for food to its hallowing⁹⁶: freedom ends up spawning a host of mutually exclusive orthopraxies.

The relationship between Christianity and nature is also fundamentally ambivalent. "Nature" was born in Judea with the idea of "Creation": it then becomes possible to know it and act upon it. "It was then that mastery of and feeling for nature started growing in parallel," Charbonneau explains.⁹⁷ Christian Creation is thus one of the sources of this feeling⁹⁸; but man's

freedom vis-à-vis nature has meaning only if he accepts the responsibility it entails and implies⁹⁹; otherwise, the dialectics between freedom and responsibility is broken and freedom unbound is no longer freedom: such is our situation today.

Science, as Bernard Charbonneau sees it, is thus born of the faith in a transcendent Creator God, which people learned to distinguish from Creation. For “what would Science be without Roger Bacon’s Franciscan theology, Pascal’s Jansenism, and Newton’s Protestantism?”¹⁰⁰ Our author nevertheless brings some nuance to his argument: Christianity is not alone responsible for the exploration, exploitation, and devastation of nature; without Christianity, however, this phenomenon would not have taken such proportions; it is thus a matter neither of condemning it nor of denying its role.¹⁰¹ But the main thing, for Charbonneau, is not to conduct a trial, to sharpen his indictment, or to hone his pleas. The crucial kernel of his analysis resides in prospects for practical openings and thus for a way out of the environmental crisis:

For this freedom of man that threatens to destroy him with his earth contains its antidote. It is in the very societies where the science and individualism born of Christianity have developed the furthest that feeling for nature, and eventually the ecological movement, were born. It is no coincidence that Rousseau is a son of the Calvinist Rome. The egalitarian, pacifist, and libertarian side of the ecological movement, in which Christians who have more or less left the church are many, comes straight out of the Gospel.¹⁰²

Bernard Charbonneau would develop in many texts his thesis of an ambivalence of Christianity in its relationship to nature: at once poison and counterpoison, like the ancient *pharmakôn*. He mentions the myth of the garden of Eden, the condemnation of cities in the Old Testament, the splendor of Creation recalled to Job by God, the choice of the countryside for Jesus’ preaching, the rural setting of his parables, God’s care toward the least of animals, and he concludes, “Hence the awakening of love for nature in Western societies that are the most shaped by the Bible.”¹⁰³ Western powers were thus the first to have launched upon the most frenzied productivity adventure and the first to have given birth to movements of resistance

against the devastation of the planet. This is what leads Charbonneau to the following analysis:

We therefore see that Christianity is at once at the origin of man's current power over nature and of the rising awareness of its negative consequences. Hence the necessity for the ecological opposition to question itself about the Christian roots of development and of its critique; otherwise, the ecological movement is likely to be torn apart between a naturist pantheism and a technoscientific progressivism, solely destined to become integrated into the current evolution. [...] The best of the Christian faith reminds us that we were formed from the earth, to accept ourselves for what we are: at once slaves to nature and freed from it. The damage is done, as it were; the old law, that of fear and necessity, is abolished. Which leaves the other one: but did not Christ put the bar too high for half-*sapiens* man? This is the only thing we can hold against him. On the eve of the year 2000, as long ago before the tree, Adam is free. Which means to either save himself or lose himself.¹⁰⁴

In an article entitled “Quel avenir pour quelle écologie?”¹⁰⁵ [What Future for Which Ecology?] Bernard Charbonneau takes up anew the debate opened by Lynn White in 1966 about Judaeo-Christianity's responsibilities in the environmental crisis, wherein he develops his dialectical approach to the issue: “The same society that destroys the Indian along with the buffalo cries out about his disappearance.”¹⁰⁶ The criticisms that some ecologists, such as Carl Amery, level at Christianity are thus not wrong, only reductive: by profaning nature, Christianity has unleashed the will to knowledge and to power in the post-Christian West, and it is there that modernity has developed. But also, its critique. For Christian tradition is categorical when it comes to condemning the obsession with knowing and exploiting. The will to power is held to be evil and destructive, while deprivation, the rejection of power and wealth, poverty are accounted salvific. In the Gospel, it is the fragile beauty of the lilies of the field that is given as a model to man: “Christianity is at once responsible for the devastation of nature in the West and in the East and the vector of the only force that can put an end to it, at once poison and counterpoison.”¹⁰⁷

Thus, Charbonneau views the Christian tradition as a true *pharmakôn*, venom and antidote all at once: the main driver of the “Great Moulting” and

the only way out of it. The paradoxical character of Charbonneau's relationship to Christianity culminates in this analysis, and in the ambivalences it highlights. His long companionship with his friend Jacques Ellul no doubt has something to do with it.

V. The Dialogue with Jacques Ellul about Christianity

Bernard Charbonneau's references to Jacques Ellul, like Ellul's to Charbonneau, are relatively rare. And yet, we know that their faithful friendship, nearly sixty years long, could not fail to have had an impact on the thought of the one as much as of the other. Charbonneau would describe this relationship as follows: after the Second World War, "I was becoming aware of the Christian origin of my love for nature and freedom. Hence a communion of thought [with Ellul] that was closer than before the war."¹⁰⁸ As for Ellul, he testifies along these lines: "From the beginning, we clashed with each other, sometimes quite sharply, in the area of faith."¹⁰⁹ But he acknowledges

the crucial influence of my friend Charbonneau. He has been at once the embodiment of a reproach for what I was not following, as a Christian, the urgent command: "Something has to be done," and a critical glance: "What you do doesn't mean anything." I have attempted to rescue the Christian faith from his criticisms through my commitments.¹¹⁰

It would be fitting to read again in parallel *Je fus*¹¹¹ and *Quatre témoins de la liberté*¹¹² and Ellul's trilogy on freedom (*Le Vouloir et le Faire*,¹¹³ *Éthique de la liberté*,¹¹⁴ and *Les combats de la liberté*¹¹⁵); *Prométhée réenchaîné*¹¹⁶ and Ellul's trilogy on revolution (*Autopsie de la révolution*,¹¹⁷ *De la révolution aux révoltes*,¹¹⁸ and *Changer de révolution*¹¹⁹); *L'État*¹²⁰ and *L'Illusion politique*¹²¹; *Dimanche et lundi*¹²² and *Pour qui, pour quoi travaillons-nous?*¹²³; *Il court, il court, le fric . . .*¹²⁴ and *L'homme et l'argent*¹²⁵; *Le totalitarisme industriel*¹²⁶ and *Le bluff technologique*¹²⁷; and finally, the articles on ecology written alternatingly, or as if to echo each other, in *Combat Nature* between 1983 and 1985.¹²⁸ The tensions and overlaps would then be located and problematized.

Among many common theme clusters, we might point out: the disqualification of the city in the Old Testament,¹²⁹ the tension between Truth and

Reality¹³⁰ (but this pairing comes to be secularized in human consciousness), the need to profane the automobile idol¹³¹ (but through poetry and not by faith in the God of Jesus Christ), the tension between revolt and revolution¹³² and their recycling by the State,¹³³ true and false presence of the Christian to the world¹³⁴ (but Charbonneau gets ironic about a presence that goes along with a very convenient absence through belonging to another world), the crucial character of the choice of a lifestyle¹³⁵ (but which our author does not portray as specifically Christian), the absence of a Christian morality¹³⁶ (but Charbonneau hastens to add, no doubt in implicit answer to Ellul, that the creature ends up feeling lost), the tension between word and image,¹³⁷ the betrayal of Christ by Christians, and the needed subversion of society by Gospel anarchism.¹³⁸

My hypothesis is as follows: it is this unadorned dialogue carried on over more than half a century by a confessing Christian, converted all of a sudden at the age of sixteen after having grown up outside any kind of religious climate, and a post-Christian agnostic, shaped by a Christian education and very well versed in that department, that largely explains the radicalness of their respective stances to the Christian faith. The chiasmus constituted by the crossing of their intellectual paths and their respective spiritual journeys proves revealing in this regard. Among other things, Charbonneau's insistence that his friend account for the errors of Christianity would throw light on the corrosive force of *La subversion du christianisme*.¹³⁹ Likewise, the resolute attestation, even to excess, of Ellul in favor of Christian exclusivism when it comes to authentic freedom would throw in a new light the incisive tension peculiar to *Je fus*,¹⁴⁰ as well as between *Je fus* and *Quatre témoins de la liberté*.¹⁴¹ The dialectics would then have played out not just within each of the two bodies of work but between them, and between our two authors, in a mode of mutual fertilization.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. References, sometimes explicit but usually implicit, to Scripture and Christian tradition abound in Bernard Charbonneau's thought and are strewn all through his work. They can be put in the service of an historical or socioreligious analysis, but most often, beside references

to ancient mythology, to literature, or to the political history of the entire world, they undergo a distortion of their original meaning to illustrate another idea, in a humorous or sarcastic mode, in their author's inimitable style.

Charbonneau's critique of Christianity can be broken down following various modalities: a ruthless critique of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's theology, pointing out its totalitarian proclivities, but also by situating himself (be it strategically or out of conviction) on the turf of the most orthodox theological argumentation; sharp criticisms of the falsifications of Christ's message by Christians throughout history, especially aimed at the technophilic or even technolatrous conformism of the Catholic Church in the twentieth century; more radical grievances against Christianity as such, in its contradictions, its hypocrisy, or its constant need for justification; finally, the critique of the religious phenomenon in general, in its social dimension, and on account of the very fact of its substantial sociological character that inevitably harms freedom of thought. Charbonneau thereby deploys a fundamentally individualistic agnostic positioning, which however does not exclude (but this is not so much a contradiction as a paradox, or even a logical consequence of agnosticism) "God" as a working hypothesis.

In parallel to this critique, our author engages in praising Christianity. He is grateful to it for having proposed to men some highly demanding principles (perhaps too demanding, which is both a vice and a virtue, or more accurately, what reveals the vices of its virtues). But his gratitude toward Christianity essentially concerns the legacy of freedom he acknowledges as its own: this is an inestimable treasure offered to mankind. Charbonneau therefore wavers between a secularized understanding of freedom, whose source would be purely subjective and autonomous, and a Christocentric version that makes its appearance in his very last texts.

Bernard Charbonneau's gaze on Christianity is fundamentally dialectical: be it for thought, food, or most especially the relationship to nature, Christianity seems to him to have an ambivalent character, as both poison and antidote, like the ancient *pharmakôn*. He therefore urges ecological movements to accept their commitment's specifically Christian resources, since he does not see any other way out of the crisis that, however paradoxically,

said Christian tradition has triggered.

It is more than likely that this subtle and complex view of Christianity as a dialectical reality is indebted to a considerable extent to Charbonneau's long companionship with Jacques Ellul. For their mutual esteem did not prevent, but actually enabled, sharp disputes about the Christian faith. It is as though the two men's opposite stances, as products of a startling biographical cross-wiring, prompted each one, in a permanent and unvarnished dialogue, to refine his reflection and his argumentation, at the price if not of extraordinary radicalizations then at least of undeniable shifts.

In the final analysis, it seems to me we can discern in the relationship between Bernard Charbonneau and Christianity a novel configuration—an unceasing reconfiguration, due to his family background, the revelation of a sense of nature and freedom through the Protestant Scout movement, the vagaries of an existential journey and a range of editorial fortunes and misfortunes, the personal genius specific to that author, and *last but not least*,¹⁴² faithfulness and friendship.

Translated by Christian Roy.

Notes

1. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel* (Paris: L'Échappée, 2019), 86–87.
2. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions: Écologie, régionalisme et sociétés locales* (Paris: Le Sang de la terre, 1991), 164.
3. See *ibid.*, 23.
4. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Un festin pour Tantale: Nourriture et société industrielle* [1997] (Paris: Le Sang de la terre, 2011), 78.
5. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 107, 111.
6. Bernard Charbonneau, *Lexique du verbe quotidien* (Geneva: Éditions Héros-Limite, 2016), 68. See also Bernard Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2001), 227.
7. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 91.
8. Bernard Charbonneau, *Comment ne pas penser* (Bordeaux: Opales, 2004), 105.

9. See John 1:14.
10. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone* [1969] (Paris: Éditions de l'Encyclopédie des nuisances, 2002), 79.
11. Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*, 124.
12. See John 14:6.
13. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'homme auto* [1967] (Paris: Denoël, 2003), 106.
14. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus: Essai sur la liberté* [1980] (Bordeaux: Opales, 2000), 105.
15. See Matt 10:34.
16. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 96.
17. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae* (La Bache: À plus d'un titre éditions, 2010), 126.
18. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 129.
19. See John 3:8.
20. Charbonneau, *L'homme auto*, 27.
21. *Ibid.*, 63.
22. See Matt 4:4; Luke 4:4.
23. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 165.
24. 1 Cor 1:23.
25. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 168.
26. See Ps 42:2–3.
27. See Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 127.
28. See John 3:5.
29. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 127.
30. See John 3:23.
31. See Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 127.
32. See Matt 8:22.
33. Bernard Charbonneau, *L'homme en son temps et en son lieu* [1960] (Paris: R&N Éditions, 2017), 36.
34. See Matt 5:17.

35. Charbonneau, *L'homme en son temps et en son lieu*, 51.
36. See Josh 10:12–14.
37. See Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 80.
38. See Luke 15:11–32.
39. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 190.
40. See Matt 22:21.
41. Bernard Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric . . .* (Bordeaux: Opales, 1996), 35.
42. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté: Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski* (Paris: R&N Éditions, 2019), 46.
43. See Matt 16:26, Mark 8:36, Luke 9:25.
44. Charbonneau, *Lexique du verbe quotidien*, 104.
45. Bernard Charbonneau, *Notre table rase: Essai* (Paris: Denoël, 1974), 205.
46. See Josh 6:20.
47. Charbonneau, *Notre table rase*, 205.
48. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Teilhard de Chardin, prophète d'un âge totalitaire* (Paris: Denoël, 1963).
49. See *ibid.*, 8.
50. See *ibid.*, 22–24.
51. See *ibid.*, 62.
52. *Ibid.*, 86.
53. *Ibid.*, 73.
54. *Ibid.*, 75.
55. *Ibid.*, 83.
56. See Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, 20.
57. See Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric . . .*, 39.
58. Charbonneau, *L'homme auto*, 130, referring to the Total Group, a French multinational founded in 1924 that is now one of the world's seven Supermajor oil companies.
59. See Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, 122, 140; *Un festin pour Tantale*, 136–37; *Sauver nos régions*, 95.
60. Charbonneau, *Notre table rase*, 192.

61. See Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 106.
62. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Dimanche et lundi: Essai* (Paris: Denoël, 1966), 21–34.
63. See Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 84–85.
64. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Le changement* (Vierzon: Le Pas de côté, 2013), 14–15. Christ's saying, "Except a corn of wheat die . . ." (John 12:24), is here called upon at a considerable distance from its meaning in the Gospel sense of its utterance.
65. Gen 1:28.
66. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 34.
67. See Charbonneau, *Sauver nos régions*, 149.
68. See Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 176–78, 195–98, 204.
69. See Charbonneau, *Comment ne pas penser*, 21–34.
70. See for instance Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 239 (freedom is described there as the gift either of nature or of an unknown God). See also Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, 152.
71. Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 289. See also Charbonneau, *Notre table rase*, 192.
72. Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 288.
73. Bernard Charbonneau, *Bien aimer sa maman* (Bordeaux: Opales, 2006), 56.
74. *Ibid.*, 58–59.
75. *Ibid.*, 66.
76. Matt 5:44.
77. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 100. Our author adds: "Love one another' is not a scientific truth" (*ibid.*, 110).
78. See Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert: Autocritique du mouvement écologique* [1980] (Lyon: Parangon/Vs, 2009), 86. See also Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 108.
79. See *ibid.*, 52.
80. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 212.
81. *Ibid.*, 19.
82. See Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, 251.
83. See Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 253–54.
84. See Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 204.

85. *Ibid.*, 131.
86. *Ibid.*, 224.
87. *Ibid.*, 226.
88. *Ibid.*, 235.
89. See Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*.
90. *Ibid.*, 86.
91. Translator's note: In a note included in a package sent to Christian Roy on June 20, 1990, Bernard Charbonneau described the enclosed type double of a ten-page text entitled "Individu et personne. Contribution à la pensée de Berdiaev" as supposed to appear in *Foi & Vie* and meant to be added as a postscript to the then still only privately printed *Je fus*. This goes to show how intimately the chapter "Berdiaev. Le chrétien, individu ou personne?" in *Quatre témoins de la liberté* is tied to *Je fus: essai sur la liberté*. For not only is the former book described in its foreword as adding some refinements to the latter, but Charbonneau had once considered his Berdyaev essay his last word on freedom as the central issue of his life and thought. It also shows Charbonneau still grappling at the end of his life with the core concepts of personalism, under whose umbrella his revolutionary venture had initially found a political home in his youth, remaining shaped by that context even though he had become increasingly critical of the movement on which he had first pinned his hopes.
92. *Ibid.*, 138–39.
93. Charbonneau, *Comment ne pas penser*, 22.
94. *Ibid.*, 23.
95. See Charbonneau, *Un festin pour Tantale*, 98.
96. See *ibid.*, 100.
97. Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, 10.
98. See *ibid.*, 20.
99. See *ibid.*, 25.
100. Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 185.
101. See Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert*, 88–89.
102. *Ibid.*, English translation by Christian Roy as *The Green Light: A Self-Critique of the Ecological Movement* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 73.
103. Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 107.

104. *Ibid.*, 108.
105. See Bernard Charbonneau, “Quel avenir pour quelle écologie?” *Foi & Vie* 37.3–4 (July 1988): 129–38.
106. *Ibid.*, 131.
107. *Ibid.*, 133.
108. Bernard Charbonneau, “Unis par une pensée commune.” *Foi & Vie* 93.5–6 (Dec. 1994): 19–28 (here page 23).
109. Jacques Ellul, *À temps et à contretemps: Entretiens avec Madeleine Garrigou-La-grange* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1981), 66.
110. *Ibid.*, 65–66.
111. See Charbonneau, *Je fus*.
112. See Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*.
113. See Jacques Ellul, *Le Vouloir et le Faire: Une critique théologique de la morale* [1964] (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2013); *Les sources de l'éthique chrétienne: Le Vouloir et le Faire, parties IV et V* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2018).
114. See Jacques Ellul, *Éthique de la liberté* [1973, 1975] (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2019).
115. See Jacques Ellul, *Les combats de la liberté* (Paris / Geneva: Le Centurion / Labor et Fides, 1984). See also Jacques Ellul, *Vivre et penser la liberté* (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2019).
116. See Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*.
117. See Jacques Ellul, *Autopsie de la révolution* [1969] (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2008).
118. See Jacques Ellul, *De la révolution aux révoltes* [1972] (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2011).
119. See Jacques Ellul, *Changer de révolution: L'inéluctable prolétariat* [1982] (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2015).
120. See Bernard Charbonneau, *L'État* [1949] (Paris: R&N Éditions, 2020).
121. See Jacques Ellul, *L'Illusion politique* [1965] (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2004).
122. See Charbonneau, *Dimanche et lundi*.
123. See Jacques Ellul, *Pour qui, pour quoi travaillons-nous?* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2013).

124. See Charbonneau, *Il court, il court, le fric . . .*
125. See Jacques Ellul, "L'homme et l'argent" [1954]. In *Le défi et le nouveau: Œuvres théologiques 1948–1991* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2007), 199–345.
126. See Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*.
127. See Jacques Ellul, *Le bluff technologique* [1988] (Paris: Hachette, 2012).
128. See Bernard Charbonneau, "La nature et la liberté, fondements du mouvement écologique." *Combat Nature* 54 (Jan.–Feb. 1983): 14–15; Jacques Ellul, "La responsabilité du christianisme dans la nature et la liberté." 54 (Jan.–Feb. 1983): 16–17; BC, "Sexualité et famille." 55 (Mar.–Apr. 1983): 12–13; JE, "Croissance démographique et société de masse." 55 (Mar.–Apr. 1983): 13–14; BC, "Écologie et agriculture." 56 (May–June 1983): 16–17; JE, "L'absurde économique." 56 (May–June 1983): 17–18; BC, "Défendre les sociétés locales contre le centralisme économique." 57 (Aug. 1983): 20–21; JE, "La classe politique." 57 (Aug. 1983): 21–22; JE, "Relations internationales: l'imbroglio." 58 (Oct. 1983): 11–12; BC, "Guerre et guerre nucléaire." 58 (Oct. 1983): 12–13; JE, "Les contradictions de la communication." 59 (Dec. 1983): 15; BC, "Accélération des transports et consommation de l'espace." 59 (Dec. 1983): 16; JE, "Crise de la culture, un exemple: l'art contemporain." 60 (Feb. 1984): 23–24; BC, "Masse, éducation et culture de masse." 60 (Feb. 1984): 25–26; JE, "Sciences, technique, désordres." 61 (May 1984): 19–20; JE, "Qu'est-ce que la technique?" 61 (May 1984): 20; BC, "Vers un désordre total." 61 (May 1984): 21–22; BC, "Écologie et menaces de guerre nucléaire." 61 (May 1984): 23; JE, "L'incertitude de la science." 65 (Aug. 1984): 32–33; BC, "Vers un meilleur des mondes." 65 (Aug. 1984): 34–35; JE, "L'idéologie de l'intérêt privé et l'idéologie de l'intérêt public." 66 (Nov. 1984): 37–38; BC, "L'écologie ni de droite ni de gauche." 66 (Nov. 1984): 38–39; JE, "Conclusion sous forme de thèses." 67 (Feb. 1985): 22–23; BC, "Nécessité de l'impossible." 67 (Feb. 1985): 24.
129. See Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, 106.
130. See Charbonneau, *Teilhard de Chardin*, 105.
131. See Charbonneau, *L'hommauto*, 133.
132. See Charbonneau, *Prométhée réenchaîné*, 13–14, 272, 310–11.
133. See *ibid.*, 28–29, 31, 197–98, 279–81, 287–88, 320–22. Our author even dares being ironic, to wit: "Pretty soon, to do a revolution, we are going to have to apply for subsidies" (Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, 133).
134. See Charbonneau, *Teilhard de Chardin*, 90; *Comment ne pas penser*, 27.
135. See Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, 258.

136. See Charbonneau, *Finis Terrae*, 205.
137. See Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert*, 179 (one year before the publication of *The Humiliation of the Word*; see Jacques Ellul, *La Parole humiliée* [1981] [Paris: La Table Ronde, 2014]).
138. See Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert*, 85 (four years before the publication of *The Subversion of Christianity*; see Jacques Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme* [1984] [Paris: La Table Ronde, 2011] and eight years before that of *Anarchy and Christianity*; see Jacques Ellul, *Anarchie et christianisme* [1988] [Paris: La Table Ronde, 2018]).
139. See Ellul, *La subversion du christianisme*.
140. See Charbonneau, *Je fus*.
141. See Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*.
142. Translator's note: In English in the original.

Bernard Charbonneau à *Foi & Vie* :

Un théologien agnostique chez les protestants

Patrick Chastenet

La collaboration de Bernard Charbonneau à la revue de culture protestante *Foi & Vie* a commencé en 1951 pour s'achever en décembre 1994 à l'occasion d'un numéro spécial consacré à la mémoire de Jacques Ellul¹. En dépit d'un silence de onze ans, entamé durant l'hiver 1960 et rompu à l'hiver 1971 lors de la création d'une chronique annoncée par la rédaction comme permanente, cette collaboration n'a vraiment rien de circonstanciel tant par sa durée—quarante-trois ans en ignorant les interruptions—que par son volume (25 articles pour un total de plus de 350 pages) et son contenu (des articles particulièrement denses évoquant des questions fondamentales dans un style d'une grande qualité littéraire et poétique).

Ces articles peuvent se diviser en trois grandes catégories : « Chronique de l'An deux mille » (12), questions écologiques *stricto sensu* hors « Chronique » (3) et sujets divers (10). Hormis peut-être la « Chronique de l'An deux mille », et à l'exception des textes réédités ultérieurement sous forme de livres, ces articles de *Foi & Vie* constituent la partie la plus méconnue d'une œuvre foisonnante encore trop souvent ignorée du grand public. Nous émettons l'hypothèse que la lecture des articles de Charbonneau dans cette revue protestante est indispensable pour les chercheurs, et pour tous ceux qui souhaitent entreprendre un examen systématique de son œuvre. En effet, cette série d'articles ne vient pas doubler son œuvre livresque mais la compléter et l'éclairer, aux plans diachronique et synchronique ; elle mérite donc une grande considération². C'est aussi vrai lorsqu'un article paru dans *Foi & Vie* est repris partiellement ou intégralement dans un livre

publié ultérieurement ; l'étude comparée des deux versions constitue, en soi, un objet de recherche digne d'intérêt tant les écarts peuvent toucher à des questions fondamentales. Par exemple, pour la plupart de ses lecteurs, l'agnosticisme de l'auteur du *Jardin de Babylone*³ est un fait acquis. Cependant, l'examen attentif de ces articles vient bousculer les certitudes en la matière. On le sait, Charbonneau se définit généralement comme « post-chrétien » ou agnostique. Or, il s'avère que dans *Foi & Vie* il lui arrive d'employer des formules pour le moins équivoques, parfois gommées lorsque l'article est fondu dans un livre.

Du reste, n'est-il pas symptomatique que ses quatre premiers articles dans cette revue protestante concernent des questions métaphysiques, pour ne pas dire expressément théologiques ? En particulier pour le second article intitulé : « Progrès et liberté. I. La liberté des enfants de Dieu ou le progrès justifie Dieu. II. La sphère et la croix » (1957) comme son premier ouvrage publié⁴, *Teilhard de Chardin, prophète d'un âge totalitaire* (1963). Sa dénonciation des mythes modernes et des nouvelles formes de sacralité peut également s'inscrire dans cette perspective. Nous voudrions appliquer ici à Charbonneau la méthode qu'il avait fait subir à Teilhard, à savoir : « aussi souvent que possible, le laisser parler lui-même⁵ » et nous cantonner, pour l'essentiel, à la revue. À défaut d'une analyse systématique des 25 articles et de leur mise en perspective avec l'intégralité de l'œuvre livresque, ce qui serait la condition *sine qua non* pour élaborer des conclusions définitives, nous formulerons de simples hypothèses à partir d'extraits que nous jugeons suffisamment significatifs pour constituer un idéaltype. Nous avons bien conscience que la présente communication ne constitue qu'une première étape qui mériterait d'être prolongée. Pour guider notre démarche nous retiendrons quatre des cinq questions fondamentales du modèle d'Harold Lasswell : Qui parle à qui ? (I) Pour dire quoi et comment ? (II)

I. Rien qu'un homme, qui parle à son prochain

Lorsqu'il s'adresse à son lecteur, Charbonneau se présente souvent comme un homme—sans (autres) qualités—et il lui arrive souvent de le faire à la première personne du singulier car c'est de lui, et de lui seul qu'il s'agit. Partant de sa propre expérience, il s'adresse à ces « quelques-uns » di-

stingués jadis par deux autres Aquitains célèbres, tout comme lui épris de liberté : Étienne de la Boétie et Élisée Reclus. Plus exactement, il vise ce qu'il y a d'unique en l'homme : sa liberté, cette liberté incarnée qui fonde son universalité. On en trouve un premier exemple dans la déclaration à la première personne du singulier qui lui sert d'incipit de l'article intitulé : « Seul meurt le vivant »⁶ : « Je suis né, j'aime et je mourrai : je ne peux rien dire de plus réel, ni de plus vrai (...) ».

Dans l'article publié l'année suivante, en 1960, intitulé « L'homme en son temps et en son lieu », l'utilisation du « je » et du « nous » signifie que l'auteur ne prétend pas s'ériger en juge impartial, en pur logicien ou en sociologue objectif. Il n'entend pas se placer en surplomb et, tel Baudelaire⁷, il s'adresse à son—« hypocrite lecteur,—mon semblable,—mon frère ! » :

Je ne peux nier l'énigme du temps : ce sourd frémissement n'est pas une abstraction, mais le cours de ma vie (...) Vient même un âge qui réalise la disparition du présent, qui ne peut plus dire : je vis, mais : j'ai vécu ; où rien n'est sûr, sinon que tout est déjà fini⁸.

Lorsque l'on fait un saut dans le temps, et dans le genre littéraire, on constate qu'il n'a pas varié de posture. Cela se confirme avec cet extrait de l'avertissement qui précède la toute première « Chronique de l'An deux mille », en décembre 1971 :

Persuadé qu'il est au cœur de l'homme un trésor intangible, et qu'il peut le sauver ou le perdre, ancré dans le torrent, je me demande d'où il vient et où il va : j'interroge l'actualité afin de ne pas m'y engloutir⁹.

À cette occasion, du reste, on notera que Bernard Charbonneau se situe indirectement par rapport à ce qu'il tient pour deux abdications opposées mais qui en réalité se combinent : la tentation réactionnaire de s'accrocher au passé, l'illusion progressiste de s'adapter au présent.

Lorsqu'il commente la déclaration de la Fédération protestante de France intitulée « Église et Pouvoirs » en 1972, il parle de lui à la troisième personne : « Il ne parle qu'en son nom. Il n'est pas chrétien, seulement post-chrétien comme tout le monde l'est peu ou prou (...) »¹⁰ croit-il bon d'ajouter. Les qualités de l'auteur sont ainsi déclinées négativement. « Pas plus qu'il n'est docteur en théologie, il ne l'est en sciences ou en sociologie. Il n'a aucune spécialité et n'est même pas philosophe. Il n'est qu'un homme

seul. » Dans la seconde « Chronique », sa subjectivité n'a pas disparu même si elle se fait plus discrète. Évoquant les doses de radioactivité : « On me parle de rem, mais qu'en sais-je ? J'en suis réduit à faire confiance comme autrefois aux autorités »¹¹. Et lorsqu'il s'adresse plus particulièrement à son lecteur chrétien, il assume sinon son matérialisme du moins son goût des bonnes choses :

Je lui répondrai que si le Français supporte qu'on le prive de pain pour lui en donner l'apparence insipide, et que sous le nom de vin on lui fournisse un jus de fruit alcoolisé, demain il supportera qu'on le prive de corps au nom du progrès rentable¹².

Aux plans matériel et spirituel, il parle toujours en connaissance de cause, et à titre personnel. Puisque la chimie envahit nos assiettes, ne faudrait-il pas communier sous les espèces du DDT et du mazout ? Car, écrit-il, « il est dit quelque part que l'Esprit s'est fait chair. Mais non pas protéines »¹³.

Dans le préambule de sa troisième « Chronique » il définit son lecteur comme son « compagnon muet » et s'excuse auprès de lui d'errer « de la cave au grenier de la maison que nous habitons provisoirement¹⁴ ». Et c'est à la première personne du singulier qu'il conclut son article en racontant que pour vivre il a autant besoin de beauté que d'air. Il veut contempler de sa fenêtre le bleu du ciel et non pas dans un musée d'art moderne. Et tant pis pour les ciels de René Magritte et le bleu outremer d'Yves Klein, le Bérnaï préfère la lumière naturelle de sa vallée. Dans le numéro spécial de *Foi & Vie* consacré au dossier « Écologie et Théologie », il adopte essentiellement un point de vue analytique, plus distancié, qui lui permet d'offrir un historique, un panorama des diverses tendances actuelles au sein du mouvement écologique et divers scénarios pour l'avenir, mais il choisit de conclure son article à la première personne¹⁵. Qu'il emploie le « je » ou le « nous », Charbonneau s'adresse toujours à chaque « un ». Il l'exprime très clairement dans sa sixième « Chronique » : « Mon lecteur (je n'en ai qu'un mais, y en aurait-il plusieurs, il est unique) (...) »¹⁶. De ce point de vue, il existe une congruence parfaite avec la démarche exposée dans son essai sur la liberté. Dans les quelques lignes placées en exergue de *Je fus*¹⁷, ouvrage rédigé au début des années 1950, l'auteur expliquait déjà que son œuvre n'était dédiée à personne : « Elle est écrite pour une personne dont j'ignore le nom. » Et après avoir évoqué, à la première personne du singulier, la coupe de vin qui

le fit naître et dont il meurt, il déclare qu'elle est dédiée à son prochain. La première ligne de l'incipit du même ouvrage utilise également la première personne du singulier pour s'adresser au lecteur : « Dans ce livre je parlerai de la liberté... ».

Ce qui nous permet d'aborder à présent le contenu indissociable de la forme de son discours, étant entendu que du point de vue du locuteur, il ne s'agit pas d'un quelconque discours littéraire ou philosophique mais d'une pensée incarnée.

II. « Pour connaître la liberté il faut l'avoir perdue¹⁸ »

Le ton est donné en 1951 dès le premier article intitulé : « Rendez à César¹⁹ ». Évoquant la césure caractérisant la vie du chrétien dans un monde qui ne l'est plus, Charbonneau rappelle au croyant que « le scandale de l'esprit infini ne se manifeste jamais aussi bien que lorsqu'il doit s'incarner dans un monde fini ! ». On note ici la présence d'une formule qui sera déclinée ultérieurement sous diverses formes et dans d'autres contextes. Son auteur nous dit en substance que dans ce monde apparemment rationalisé et désenchanté subsistent une aspiration religieuse, un besoin de Vérité qui s'expriment via le culte étatique et l'idolâtrie nationaliste.

C'est toutefois avec le second article, six ans plus tard, titré « Progrès et liberté », que le style de ses interventions est définitivement fixé. « L'éveil de la conscience chrétienne ne peut être que celui de la contradiction entre une exigence infinie et une existence finie²⁰. » Un style qui présente trois caractéristiques : priorité à la phrase à sentence et à l'aphorisme plutôt qu'à la démonstration logique, souci de concision pour le fond et de symétrie pour la forme, recours aux figures de rhétorique permettant de souligner le parallélisme d'idées, comme ici le recours à l'assonance, figure d'élocution par consonance²¹. Avec le théologien Teilhard de Chardin, il s'attaque à l'un de ces « géants qui marquent la fin d'une espèce », pour reprendre ses propres termes. Il est difficile d'imaginer aujourd'hui la place occupée après la Libération par l'auteur du *Phénomène humain* (1955), bien au-delà des cercles catholiques. Tandis qu'à usage du public cultivé la revue mensuelle de référence²² *La Table Ronde* lui avait consacré un numéro spécial aux allures de long dithyrambe, le quotidien populaire *France-Soir* s'était mis pour

l'occasion à la théologie. C'est donc parce qu'il y voit un fait social, sinon un symptôme, que Charbonneau se met en demeure de le décortiquer. Il le caractérise comme l'un des systèmes les plus monstrueux que l'homme ait jamais inventé. Teilhard étant père jésuite et paléontologue, « le métier et la tradition de son ordre le poussaient à élever l'évolution à hauteur d'une théologie²³ ». Homme de Dieu et de science, il a l'intuition fondamentale de l'Un. « Ici-bas comme en Dieu rien n'est séparé et rien n'est perdu : tout procède d'un Centre suprême auquel tout aboutit ». Il accorde à Teilhard d'avoir senti l'inconfort du chrétien dans le monde moderne condamné à choisir entre trahir le monde ou trahir Dieu. Parce que la religion s'est séparée de la vie et la vie de la religion, Teilhard propose d'apporter une religion à la Science et un savoir à l'Église. Jadis la foi chrétienne avait su faire la synthèse entre l'aristotélisme et l'humanisme de la Renaissance, il convient selon lui d'opérer une nouvelle synthèse réconciliant l'esprit et la matière. Si Teilhard acquiesce à la formule du biologiste Julian Huxley : « L'Homme n'est autre chose que l'Évolution devenue consciente d'elle-même », Charbonneau n'adhère pas aux concepts de « noosphère » et de « Christ cosmique », à cette pensée en majuscules qui considère la vie des hommes concrets « comme pourrait la voir un aviateur volant dans la stratosphère ». Il s'agit en définitive d'un pur système de justification qui, prétendant réunir la sphère et la croix, menace le libre arbitre de l'homme.

Dans « Seul meurt le vivant », il est aussi question de l'homme et de Dieu puisque « après la mort de Dieu, le dernier sacré est la mort de l'homme²⁴ ». C'est en cela que Charbonneau opère comme un théologien agnostique, en ce qu'il interroge les mythes modernes, explore les nouveaux territoires du sacré. On retrouve sous sa plume plusieurs figures de rhétorique. L'ellipse : « On ne meurt pas, mais quelqu'un » (p. 44). Le paradoxe, de très loin sa figure préférée : « Mais l'homme refuse la mort en même temps qu'il la découvre » (p. 47), « La mort n'est jamais naturelle » (p. 49) ; « Au désespoir de qui n'a plus rien à attendre s'ajoute l'angoisse de qui peut tout redouter » (p. 50) ; « La fuite devant la mort va de pair avec le goût du morbide » (p. 56) ; « La vie, c'est la mort : les cadavres ne la connaissent point. La reconnaissance de la mort est la condition de toute révolte contre elle » (p. 56) ; et enfin, ce qui constitue l'une des idées-forces de cet article : « Toute la grandeur de l'homme naissant rigoureusement de toute sa misère » (p. 57).

Cette formule évoque celle de Boileau disant d'un noble fier mais désargenté, obligé à s'allier au bourgeois, qu'il « rétablit son honneur à force d'infamie. »²⁵ La distance entre le paradoxe rhétorique permettant de susciter la réflexion et le paradoxisme aux allures d'oxymore, au sens de Fontanier, est parfois ténue. On pense alors à deux de ses augustes prédécesseurs : Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (« Tout doit changer pour que rien ne change ») et Jacques Prévert (« Paris est tout petit, c'est sa vraie grandeur »).

Après avoir observé une coïncidence entre l'allongement de la durée de la vie et un mouvement d'opinion en faveur de l'euthanasie, Charbonneau nous dit en substance que (la conscience de) la mort est consubstantielle à (la conscience de) la liberté. La mort de Dieu devait émanciper l'homme, mais elle a débouché sur une nouvelle foi : le culte du progrès matériel, de l'organisation centralisée et de l'efficacité économique : « L'Etat totalitaire est un sous-produit de notre refus de la mort » (p. 52). Il faut donc les désacraliser tous les deux, ramener le but au moyen. En réalité, l'homme ne craint pas la mort mais l'angoisse qu'elle suscite car elle nous oblige à « naître enfin à notre vie personnelle » (p. 57). Paradoxalement, c'est par la conscience de notre mort physique que nous accédons à notre vérité spirituelle. Vivre avec cette réalité insupportable, « cette folie que rien ne justifie », est le propre de la condition humaine. Soulignant l'ambivalence foncière de la vie et de la mort, Charbonneau se fait lyrique :

Ce point d'amertume dans la douceur, voici le sel de l'existence ; du pourpre de cette blessure saigne l'aube de toute vie. Divin soir d'été tu déclines ; et, ce rai de gloire dont tu me perces est le cri de ton agonie²⁶.

Il précise ensuite que c'est parce que nous savons nos jours comptés que nous devons nous sauver de la mort, par notre vie, et non au seul instant de mourir. Une idée qu'il développera longuement dans « L'homme en son temps et en son lieu » (p. 320–22). Cette démocratie de la mort est donc la seule universalité pouvant nous réunir tout en conservant nos différences. Le dernier paragraphe est entièrement consacré au Dieu chrétien, et il est troublant de constater que non seulement l'auteur ne se démarque pas du récit biblique mais qu'il ne prend pas ses distances avec le phénomène surnaturel de la résurrection. Après avoir rappelé le célèbre cri *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani* ?, Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, pourquoi m'as-tu abandonné ?, il con-

clut ainsi : « Là où le fils de Dieu est passé, chaque homme doit passer ; parce qu'il est né, mais aussi parce qu'il doit renaître. Celui qui vit, meurt : mais le sépulcre est le lieu de la résurrection²⁷. »

En réalité, sa posture semble strictement agnostique dans la mesure où elle ne tranche pas. Si l'on se souvient de la formule de l'ethnologue Jean Pouillon : « Seul l'incroyant croit que le croyant croit »²⁸, et que l'on veut bien admettre que l'athée, lui aussi, croit—en l'inexistence de Dieu—Charbonneau laisse la porte ouverte aux deux croyances dans « L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu » :

Quant à l'appel du Christ, l'individu s'éveille, la nostalgie de l'éternité l'envahit (...) Mais l'Infini appartient-il à Dieu ou à l'homme ? (...) le Temps et l'Espace de la Science *n'existent pas* : ils n'existent, avec la Création, que par un Créateur. (...) cette immensité n'est pas à notre taille. Seule une présence divine pourrait la peupler²⁹.

Il use toutefois d'une formulation des plus équivoque lorsque, après avoir rappelé que la mémoire est indispensable à la constitution de la personne, il ajoute : « et au maintien de l'homme créé par Dieu³⁰ ». Cet article consacré au paradoxe du temps et de l'espace aborde également quatre thèmes significatifs : la surpopulation, le tourisme de masse, l'accélération et l'enracinement. Charbonneau adopte des positions que l'on pourrait qualifier de néo malthusiennes huit ans avant *The Population Bomb* de Paul Ehrlich, édité par le Sierra Club en 1968 aux USA, et par les Amis de la Terre en 1971 en France. « L'espace humain se condense en un globe fini et surpeuplé » (p. 319) ; « l'homme disparaîtra dans un univers concentrationnaire, surpeuplé et surorganisé » (p. 320) ; « le plus grand nombre s'accumule dans des sociétés surpeuplées et surorganisées » (p. 327) ; « Nous sommes tous là, les uns sur les autres » (p. 334) ; « Nous sommes trop nombreux d'ailleurs (...) Ainsi, dans ces villes surpeuplées où l'espace se vend à prix d'or » (p. 334) ; « Nos univers concentrationnaires éliminent la liberté en entassant les individus (...) il faudrait une population moins dense » conclut l'auteur qui préconise la maison plutôt que l'immeuble, le bourg plutôt que la ville. Qu'il soit marin, nomade ou montagnard, jadis l'homme libre parcourait l'espace alors qu'aujourd'hui « la masse des touristes a suivi l'avant-garde des explorateurs » (p. 323). Nous n'avons plus le temps de voir venir, Chinois de Taïchen et boutiquiers du Lot, parcourent en tout sens la même

planète. « Les machines qui nous aident à franchir l'espace dressent aussi les obstacles qui nous les rendent infranchissables. (...) les moyens qui nous permettent de fuir permettent de nous poursuivre encore plus vite » (p. 334). Cette veine sera creusée dans *Le Jardin de Babylone* : « La foule fuit la foule, le civilisé la civilisation. C'est ainsi que la nature disparaît, détruite par le sentiment même qui l'a fait découvrir (...) Parce qu'il y a des machines, sur sa machine l'homme fuit la machine³¹ ». Charbonneau pratique à merveille l'art de l'ellipse ou l'anacoluthie : « Car en même temps que la ville se développe le besoin d'en sortir³² ». Il est convaincu que le sens de la durée manquera de plus en plus dans un monde où le temps s'accélère (p. 319). Dans ce courant qui tourbillonne de plus en plus vite nous perdons pied. Mais si la technique nous fait gagner du temps pour parcourir l'espace, « le temps et l'espace nous fuient avec la rapidité de l'éclair, quand nous les poursuivons à la vitesse de la foudre » (p. 329). Le temps nous manque mais lorsque nous l'avons, il faut le tuer. Nos loisirs sont plus exténuants que la fuite que nous pratiquons dans notre travail, et l'agenda du retraité est plus rempli que celui du premier ministre. L'avion nous mystifie car il a beau rétrécir le monde, c'est seulement la distance géographique qu'il supprime et pas celle qui nous sépare de l'étranger. Comme Jésus, « nous n'avons plus ni feu ni lieu, nous sommes perpétuellement en marche vers un ailleurs » (p. 335), nous dit Charbonneau qui vante les vertus de l'enracinement. Mais attention, sa conception de la patrie n'est pas identitaire car l'homme la retrouve à l'issue d'une longue quête (p. 327). Alors que le monde moderne s'attaque à l'homme par deux voies apparemment contradictoires, en l'attachant aux biens matériels d'une part et en coupant ce corps sans âme de toute relation profonde avec la nature d'autre part, Charbonneau définit la liberté comme la faculté de « s'enraciner dans un lieu plutôt que de se disperser en surface » (p. 339). Si nous voulons en finir avec notre stérile agitation, il nous faut d'abord trouver une patrie mais « toute trouvaille est le fruit d'une quête ». Si nous ne la trouvons pas sur notre lieu de travail, le voyage peut devenir l'occasion d'une « recherche lente et approfondie du lieu où nous pourrions durablement nous arrêter ». La liberté se risque autant qu'elle se situe. Elle suppose un minimum d'espace mais pour que l'homme ait un minimum de place, « il lui en faut trop : dans son pays et dans sa maison », alors que partout nos sociétés entassent les individus. Ce

n'est qu'avec une population moins dense et une économie réinventée que l'homme pourra retrouver le chemin de la liberté. Charbonneau nous dit en substance qu'il faut d'abord fonder son port d'attache pour pouvoir voyager avec profit, et avoir envie d'ouvrir la porte aux étrangers.

Pour terminer, imaginons l'hypothèse improbable d'un lecteur exclusif de *Foi & Vie*, sans radio, journaux ou télévision, il n'aurait pu ignorer ce qui à l'aube des années 1970 apparaissait comme un nouveau fait social : l'émergence d'un mouvement écologique. Grâce à Charbonneau et à sa « Chronique de l'An deux mille » inaugurée dès 1971, ainsi qu'aux trois articles de fond (1974, 1977, 1988) spécialement consacrés à cette thématique, ce lecteur imaginaire disposerait, en la personne de l'auteur du *Feu vert*, d'un informateur de choix, capable de le renseigner de l'intérieur d'un mouvement dont il est partie prenante mais en mesure aussi de porter un regard extérieur car refusant l'étiquette « écologiste ». Avec le recul du temps essayons de restituer aujourd'hui les grands axes de son argumentaire en prenant trois thèmes pour fil rouge : la responsabilité du christianisme dans la crise écologique, l'intégrisme naturiste et le risque d'écofascisme. Le qualificatif d'écologiste permet de désigner une révolte contre le développement exponentiel mais aussi, par sa forme scientifique, de la réintégrer dans le système qu'elle menace. Ce mot est trop réducteur pour désigner la relation homme/nature. L'homme ne peut détruire la nature sans se détruire lui-même, car toutes ses joies lui sont données par la terre qu'il habite. La grande nouveauté de ce mouvement conservatoire, sinon conservateur, est de prendre une tonalité révolutionnaire. Le gauchisme non marxiste renoue ainsi avec la tradition rousseauiste et son rêve libertaire d'une vie heureuse et simple. En chassant Zeus de l'Olympe, en désacralisant le Cosmos, en présentant la nature comme une création de Dieu, et en faisant de l'homme, créé à son image, son lieutenant sur terre, le christianisme a permis à la science de se saisir d'un objet profané. La maîtrise spirituelle ayant précédé la maîtrise pratique, la pente du christianisme a été d'oublier que la création était l'œuvre de Dieu. Il a en effet déchainé la volonté de connaissance et de puissance caractérisant ce que l'on nomme en Occident la « modernité ». Charbonneau se réfère non pas aux thèses de l'américain Lynn White³³ mais à celles de l'écologiste bavarois Carl Amery³⁴, son collègue d'ECOROPA. Il lui oppose cependant le fait que la tradition chrétienne fait de

l'homme le maître de la nature et non son créateur, et à ce titre il n'est pas chargé de détruire son royaume mais de le transmettre à sa descendance. Sans le citer, il rejoint Ellul pour rappeler que cette tradition condamne l'obsession de connaître et d'exploiter, la volonté de puissance alors qu'elle glorifie le dénuement, l'humilité, la frugalité. C'est même la beauté fragile du lys des champs qui est offerte en modèle dans les Évangiles. C'est aussi l'Occident qui a inventé l'écologie scientifique comme le protestantisme a engendré le sentiment de la nature et les premières associations de protection. Et Charbonneau de souligner le paradoxe des choses par le paradoxe des mots : « La même société qui détruit avec le bison l'Indien, pleure sur sa disparition³⁵ ». Nous avons questionné plus haut l'agnosticisme déclaré de l'auteur. Soulignons alors cette assertion datée de 1988, dans le tout dernier article consacré à la nature parue dans la revue protestante : « Le christianisme est à la fois responsable de la dévastation de la nature à l'Ouest et à l'Est, et porteur de la seule force qui puisse y mettre fin »³⁶. Autrement dit, la solution à la crise écologique ne réside pas dans ce qu'il dénonce comme un intégrisme naturiste, illustré notamment par le naturaliste suisse Robert Hainard. Le christianisme ayant choisi la culture contre la nature, les sociétés post-chrétiennes ont engendré un naturisme répliquant la matrice originelle. La pente du mouvement dit écologiste est un paganisme rebouilli, une sorte de panthéisme aboutissant au culte de la nécessité, à l'*amor fati*, pour parler comme Nietzsche, faisant disparaître la personne, divine ou humaine, dans la totalité du groupe ou de la nature. Pour l'auteur du *Miracle d'être* et du *Guetteur de lune*, la nature est une déesse qu'il faut protéger à tout prix de ses plus farouches ennemis : au premier rang desquels le chrétien, l'agriculteur, et partant l'homme ordinaire, qu'il conviendrait de maintenir à bonne distance d'authentiques réserves naturelles, ouvertes à quelques spécialistes patentés et à diverses personnalités de première importance. Quelle que soit l'estime qu'il porte à ces naturalistes, écologistes de la première heure, Charbonneau s'insurge contre cette volonté de mettre des petits morceaux de nature sauvage sous cloche pour mieux dévaster l'ensemble, c'est-à-dire le véritable environnement de l'homme moderne dans les sociétés techno-industrielles. Or ce n'est pas en éliminant l'homme que l'on sauvera la nature, qui n'est autre que le fruit de la création humaine, c'est en le réintroduisant dans l'équation. Le « système » peut tout aussi facilement s'accommoder du ghetto naturiste que du rayon bio.

Enfin, et Charbonneau anticipe ce risque dès 1974, un « écofascisme » pourrait voir le jour à la suite d'une catastrophe ou d'une crise, organisant « la grande communion de la horde sous la direction de ses chefs³⁷ ». Une hypothèse qu'il développe encore trois ans plus tard alors que les candidats écologistes obtiennent 7% à Paris et 10% en Alsace. « Sommés de penser dans une maison qui commence à brûler³⁸ », face à l'urgence écologique on doit se hâter lentement sous peine d'accident. Le demi-tour doit se faire en douceur. « Il ne peut y avoir de développement indéfiniment accéléré dans un espace fini³⁹ ». La croissance mène à une impasse, certes, mais on risque un jour de manquer autant de liberté et d'égalité que d'oxygène. « L'écofascisme est une possibilité moins lointaine qu'on pourrait le croire : sauver le bien commun, la terre et l'homme, vaut bien qu'on lui sacrifie la liberté comme en temps de guerre⁴⁰ ». Idée à mettre en parallèle avec l'une des thèses exposées antérieurement dans sa critique du mouvement écologiste. Ce n'est pas tant la planète que l'organisation sociale menace que la liberté et l'égalité.

Les gouvernements seront de plus en plus contraints d'agir pour gérer des ressources et un espace qui se raréfient. (...) La préservation du taux d'oxygène nécessaire à la vie ne pourra être assurée qu'en sacrifiant cet autre fluide vital : la liberté⁴¹.

Charbonneau refuse quant à lui de choisir entre le chaos et le système. La défense de la nature qu'il entend promouvoir est aussi celle de l'égalité dans la liberté, du milieu de vie contre le totalitarisme industriel, de l'existant contre l'utopie, du *topos* face à l'abstrait.

Conclusions

Bernard Charbonneau se présente le plus souvent comme « un homme parmi d'autres⁴² ». Il n'est certes pas le premier à user de la première personne du singulier mais, à la différence de saint Augustin, s'il livre lui aussi sa vérité sans fard, il ne confesse jamais un Dieu personnel pour mieux édifier les fidèles. À l'instar de son compatriote Montaigne, son ton est souvent ironique voire caustique, mais il est plus grave et surtout nettement plus nostalgique. S'il partage avec lui le « je » existentiel, il se tient à bonne distance de l'*ego* métaphysique de Descartes. À la différence de

l'auteur des *Méditations métaphysiques*, Charbonneau ne pourrait pas soutenir : « Je ne suis qu'une chose qui pense ». Il détourne même le fameux « Je pense donc je suis » en « Je ne suis que si je pense », ou encore en « Tu ne penses pas donc tu n'es pas » car, dirait Charbonneau, pour peu que j'y pense, je découvre que ma pensée n'est pas personnelle. À trois siècles de distance, il s'est posé les mêmes questions que Blaise Pascal—lecteur attentif de Montaigne—quant au temps et à l'espace, mais il n'a pas fait sien le pari de l'auteur des *Pensées*. Chez Rousseau, il préfère résolument « Jean-Jacques », mais il ne porte pas, comme lui, son cœur meurtri en bandoulière. S'il annonce le Swann de Proust, l'auteur des *Confessions* a le double tort de gratter complaisamment sa plaie et de réserver la démocratie à un peuple de dieux. Comme Nietzsche, Charbonneau a le style poétique et le goût de l'aphorisme mais pas la conception de l'homme. De Jean Giono, il a souvent le lyrisme, mais il raille le caractère lénifiant de sa littérature bucolique. Bref, s'il fallait à tout prix lui trouver un prédécesseur sinon un inspirateur, c'est peut-être du côté de Kierkegaard qu'il faudrait se tourner. L'auteur de *Crainte et tremblement* ne refuse-t-il pas, lui aussi, le statut du philosophe ? Le Béarnais n'est-il pas, comme le Danois, une sorte de « poète-dialecticien » amoureux des paradoxes, un simple « écrivain amateur » n'offrant aucun système de pensée ? Toutefois, le nom de Kierkegaard n'apparaît que très rarement sous la plume de Charbonneau, qui se présente par ailleurs comme n'étant ni parieur ni (« chevalier de la foi ») sauteur. Façon de dire que la foi en Dieu le sépare de Pascal tout autant que de Kierkegaard⁴³, même si le doute subsiste.

Il nous faut donc continuer de mettre en perspective les articles de Charbonneau publiés dans *Foi & Vie* avec l'ensemble de son œuvre si l'on veut risquer quelques hypothèses. Après *Je fus*⁴⁴ et *Une seconde nature* (1981), la lecture de son troisième et dernier opus sur la liberté⁴⁵ permet d'écarter définitivement la thèse d'un Charbonneau opportuniste offrant à son lectorat les antennes qu'il ressasse. Ses articles de *Foi & Vie* s'adressent à un public majoritairement chrétien dont il connaît la culture, l'histoire, l'axiologie et les attentes, mais qu'il lui offre de régénérer et de sublimer. Aux problèmes métaphysiques abordés dès ses premiers articles dans la revue protestante répond le questionnement existentiel de toute une vie. Son intuition centrale voulant que le développement accéléré des sciences et des techniques

menace la liberté de l'homme autant que l'équilibre du vivant ne doit pas faire oublier le fait que tout son raisonnement s'inscrit dans le cadre d'une société qu'il définit comme « post-chrétienne ». Le concept ne doit rien à l'improvisation, car il renvoie dos à dos les qualificatifs de « païenne » et de « chrétienne »⁴⁶. Il implique une véritable incorporation du christianisme, non comme éthique au quotidien dans toute son exigence, non comme une appropriation culturelle en profondeur de ses valeurs, de ses rites et de ses règles, mais à titre d'héritage vivant et indépassable prévenant que toute tentative de retour au panthéisme, par la voie d'un quelconque intégrisme naturiste, ne débouche que sur de nouvelles formes de barbarie⁴⁷.

En outre, toute l'œuvre de Charbonneau présuppose une bonne connaissance de la Bible tant les références directes ou indirectes, aux Évangiles en particulier, y sont abondantes⁴⁸. Lorsque sur la question de la liberté Charbonneau se choisit quatre témoins irrécusables pour échapper au reproche d'excès de subjectivisme, c'est bien dans la tradition chrétienne qu'il s'inscrit. Rompant avec l'exposé chronologique, il présente Rousseau avant Montaigne. Fils de la Rome calviniste ayant vécu l'essentiel de sa vie en terre catholique, héritier fidèle et infidèle des Évangiles *intus et in cute*, selon une formule qu'affectionne Charbonneau, ce citoyen de Genève est parfois regardé comme l'Antéchrist. La réalisation du contrat social, tel que décrit par Rousseau, exige des qualités exceptionnelles hors de portée du commun des mortels. Charbonneau lui préfère Montaigne, lequel juge toujours « à hauteur d'homme » et se reconnaît dans Pascal se reconnaissant dans Montaigne. « Ce n'est pas dans Montaigne, mais dans moi que je trouve tout ce que j'y vois⁴⁹ ». Leurs cas respectifs ne résument-ils pas l'humaine condition ? Dans l'auteur des *Essais*, Charbonneau aime cette quête de l'individu incarné, cette exposition sans fard d'une humanité fortement individualisée, cette invitation à être soi par le biais de l'examen de conscience. Il partage avec lui cette vision de l'homme comme être inachevé et imparfait ne pouvant accéder à l'infini qui est réservé à Dieu. Un Dieu auquel on accède via la communion, la récitation du Patenôte, et non par la démonstration logique.

Chez le personnaliste russe Berdiaev, Charbonneau apprécie que la priorité accordée au sujet ne nie pas le lien l'unissant à l'univers, la nature, la société, à Dieu s'il a la foi, mais le rend paradoxal. Mais pour Charbonneau, l'in-

dividu est toujours premier, car il ne peut pas avoir de Dieu s'il n'existe pas d'abord quelqu'un pour le connaître, alors que l'auteur de *De l'esclavage et de la liberté de l'homme* (1946) met l'accent sur la personne, comprise comme catégorie principalement axiologique, et en cela hors de portée de la plupart des individus de chair et d'os. Ce n'est pas pour rien que Charbonneau rappelle à Berdiaev en particulier et aux chrétiens en général le sens de la parabole du bon pasteur (Mt 18, 12–13). S'il peut sembler paradoxal d'abandonner la garde de 99 brebis pour retrouver la 100^{ème} qui s'est égarée, c'est bien parce qu'à la différence des autres religions, le christianisme entend s'appuyer sur la liberté de l'individu. Le Fils de l'homme est venu sauver ce qui était perdu.

C'est surtout lorsque Charbonneau aborde Dostoïevski que l'on s'aperçoit à quel point une bonne connaissance de la Bible est indispensable à celui qui veut saisir la richesse de sa pensée. De la même façon qu'il est nécessaire d'avoir à l'esprit Matthieu 4, 1–11 ou Luc 4, 1–13 lorsqu'on lit la parabole du Grand Inquisiteur si l'on ne veut pas se contenter d'une lecture superficielle de ce passage crucial des *Frères Karamazov*. Ivan, l'athée, imagine pour son moine de frère que le Christ redescende sur terre à Séville au temps de l'Inquisition et qu'il ressuscite un enfant. Il est alors immédiatement arrêté et emprisonné par le cardinal qui veut lui démontrer qu'il n'a rien à faire sur terre, car en apportant la liberté aux hommes Jésus les plonge dans le trouble et le malheur. Dans l'Évangile, lorsqu'il est confronté successivement aux trois grandes tentations, Jésus répond chaque fois à Satan, alors que, dans le poème d'Ivan, il reste muet et que le Grand Inquisiteur ne s'aperçoit même pas qu'il monologue. Ce qui fascine Charbonneau dans ce conte moral, ce n'est pas tant la hantise des personnages de Dostoïevski de ne pouvoir pratiquer leur foi chrétienne comme elle l'exige, que l'expression des contradictions strictement insolubles de la condition humaine. Toute son œuvre, en définitive, s'articule autour de la tension entre le devoir pour l'homme de vivre sa liberté pour être homme et l'impossibilité d'y parvenir. Il aurait suffi que Jésus cède aux trois forces capables de les enchaîner—le miracle, le mystère et la puissance—pour que les hommes trouvent le chemin du bonheur, mais un bonheur satanique. Pour Charbonneau, en prétendant aimer les hommes plus que lui-même Jésus leur en demande trop en leur donnant une liberté qui les dépasse. Le Grand Inquisiteur pense

qu'il faut les commander, les rassurer et les distraire, comme les enfants qu'ils sont. La Révélation chrétienne lance à l'espèce humaine un défi qui la dépasse. L'image qui revient à plusieurs reprises sous la plume de l'interprète de Dostoïevski, c'est que Jésus a placé trop haut la barre. L'exigence divine est au-dessus de nos forces. « Sommes-nous de taille à nous convertir à l'appel d'un Dieu de liberté sans être soutenus par la foi en un Dieu-homme⁵⁰ ? », se demande Charbonneau, témoin indésirable et inflexible de la confrontation douloureuse entre un passé où le Dieu des chrétiens s'est fait homme et un présent où l'homme se fait dieu. Lorsqu'enfin Charbonneau qualifie Dostoïevski d'« athée chrétien », on songe alors à un autoportrait, car l'on se souvient que cet agnostique n'en a pas moins récité le Notre Père, tous les soirs depuis sa prime jeunesse jusqu'à son dernier souffle⁵¹.

Notes

1. Le documentaliste Roland de Miller a établi une bibliographie quasi exhaustive de ses publications que l'on retrouve dans les annexes de Jacques Prades (Dir.), *Bernard Charbonneau : une vie entière à dénoncer la grande imposture*, Toulouse, Erès, 1997, p. 213–20.
2. L'article « Rendez à César » est une sorte de condensé des thèses de *L'État* (1951). Il faudrait pouvoir comparer ligne à ligne « L'homme dans son temps et dans son lieu » (1960), réédité par R&N en 2017, avec plusieurs chapitres de *Je fus* (1980), « L'Adieu aux armes » (1982), « Sur *Belle du Seigneur* d'Albert Cohen » (1989) avec *Finis Terrae* (2010), les « Chroniques de l'An deux mille » avec *Le Feu vert* (1980).
3. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, Paris, Gallimard, 1973.
4. Le manuscrit de *Par la force des choses* aurait été achevé en 1948. Cf. Daniel Cérézuëlle, *Écologie et liberté. Bernard Charbonneau précurseur de l'écologie politique*, Parangon/Vs, Lyon, 2006.
5. Bernard Charbonneau, « Progrès et liberté », *Foi & Vie* 56 (1957), p. 495.
6. Bernard Charbonneau, « Seul meurt le vivant », *Foi & Vie*, 58, n°1, janv.-fév. 1959, p. 44–61, qui constitue le chapitre 5 de la première partie du livre *Je fus*.
7. Charles Baudelaire, « Au lecteur », in *Les Fleurs du mal* [1857], Paris, Garnier-Flammarion, 1964, p. 34.

8. Bernard Charbonneau, « L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu », *Foi & Vie*, 59, n°5, sept.–oct. 1960, p. 321. Article partiellement fondu dans le chapitre 3 de la première partie du livre *Je fus*.
9. Bernard Charbonneau, « Chronique de l'An deux mille », *Foi & Vie*, 70, n°6, déc. 1971, p. 40–59.
10. Bernard Charbonneau, « Le regard de l'autre », *Foi & Vie*, 71, n°2/3, mars–juin 1972, p. 103–10.
11. Bernard Charbonneau, « Chronique de l'An deux mille », *Foi & Vie*, 71, n°6, déc. 1972, p. 90.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
14. Bernard Charbonneau, « Chronique de l'An deux mille », *Foi & Vie*, 72, n°5/6, déc. 1973, p. 73.
15. Bernard Charbonneau, « Un nouveau fait social : Le mouvement écologique », in *Foi & Vie*, 73, n°5/6, déc. 1974, p. 82–92.
16. Bernard Charbonneau, « Chronique de l'An deux mille », *Foi & Vie*, 75, n°5/6, déc. 1976, p. 97.
17. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus. Essai sur la liberté* [1980], Bordeaux, Opales, 2000.
18. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus, op. cit.*, p. 18.
19. Bernard Charbonneau, « Rendez à César », *Foi & Vie*, 67, n°2, mars 1951, p. 137–61.
20. Bernard Charbonneau, « Progrès et liberté », *Foi & Vie*, 55, n°6, nov.–déc. 1957, p. 493.
21. Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours* [1818–1830], Paris, Champs/Flammarion, 1977. On songe ici du reste à son autre formule qui, celle là, fera florès ultérieurement : « On ne peut poursuivre un développement infini dans un monde fini ».
22. Comité de rédaction : Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, André Malraux, Thierry Maulnier, Jean Paulhan, Denis de Rougemont, Jules Roy, Henri Troyat puis François Mauriac, Gabriel Marcel, Jean Mistler, Jacques Duhamel, Charles Orenego, Roland Laudenbach.
23. Bernard Charbonneau, « Progrès et liberté », *Foi & Vie, op. cit.*, p. 494.
24. Bernard Charbonneau, « Seul meurt le vivant », *op. cit.*, p. 44.
25. Fontanier, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

26. Bernard Charbonneau, « Seul meurt le vivant », *op. cit.*, p. 57.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 61 et *Je fus*, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
28. Jean Pouillon, *Le Cru et le su*, Paris, Seuil, 1993.
29. *Art. cité*, pp. 322–24, 327.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 338.
31. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
32. Une formulation à mettre en parallèle avec celle-ci extraite d'un article consacré à l'écologie : « La même société qui détruit avec le bison l'Indien, pleure sur sa disparition », *Foi & Vie*, n°3–4, juil. 1988, p. 131.
33. Lynn White, Jr., 'The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis', *Science*, 155, no. 3767 (Mar. 1967), pp. 1203–207.
34. Carl Amery, *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums* [La fin de la Providence. Les conséquences impitoyables du christianisme], Reinbek, Rowohlt, 1972. Traduction française : *Fin de la Providence*, Paris, Seuil, 1976.
35. Bernard Charbonneau, « Quel avenir pour quelle écologie ? », *Foi et Vie*, 87, n°3/4, juil. 1988, p. 131.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 133.
37. Bernard Charbonneau, « Un nouveau fait social : le mouvement écologique », *Foi & Vie*, 73, n°5/6, déc. 1974, p. 91.
38. Bernard Charbonneau, « Problèmes théoriques et pratiques du mouvement écologique », *Foi & Vie*, 76, n°2/3, av. 1977, p. 113. On attribue généralement à Jean-Paul Deléage, fondateur de la revue *Écologie & Politique*, la paternité de la formule prononcée par le président Jacques Chirac en 2002, lors du Sommet de la terre de Johannesburg : « Notre maison brûle et nous regardons ailleurs ».
39. Bernard Charbonneau, « Quel avenir pour quelle écologie ? », *op. cit.*, p. 114.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
41. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Feu vert. Autocritique du mouvement écologique* [1980], réédition Parangon/Vs, 2009, p. 100.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
43. Sur les affinités entre Pascal et Kierkegaard, et en particulier sur leur rapport singulier au christianisme, cf. André Clair, « Pascal et Kierkegaard face à face », *Les Études philosophiques*, 96, no. 1, 2011, pp. 3–18.

44. Rédigé au début des années 1950, *Je fus. Essai sur la liberté* fut publié à compte d'auteur en 1980, puis à titre posthume : Bordeaux, Opales, 2000.
45. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté. Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski*, Paris, R&N Éditions, 2019. Daniel Cérézuelle indique dans sa préface que ce livre a été rédigé « au soir de sa vie ».
46. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
47. Bernard Charbonneau, « Christianisme, science et technique, sectes et écologie », *Combat Nature*, n°110, aout 1995, p. 47. (Repris sous le titre “Raison scientifique et réaction sectaire” dans Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel*, Paris, L'Échappée, 2019, p. 109–11.)
48. Frédéric Rognon, « Bernard Charbonneau et le christianisme », Communication au colloque Actualité de la pensée de Bernard Charbonneau, Institut d'Études Politiques de Bordeaux, 21 & 22 novembre 2019.
49. *Pensées* (Lafuma, 689), cité dans Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatres témoins de la liberté*, *op. cit.*, p. 65.
50. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, *op. cit.*, p. 139.
51. Sur ce point cf. Sébastien Morillon-Brière, « Bernard Charbonneau–Jacques Ellul : correspondance de jeunesse (1933–1946) », *Foi & Vie*, n°1, mars 2012, p. 55–62.

Bernard Charbonneau at *Foi & Vie*: An Agnostic Theologian among Protestants

Patrick Chastenet

Bernard Charbonneau's contributions to the Protestant cultural review *Foi & Vie* [Faith & Life] began in 1951 and ended in December 1994 on the occasion of a special issue in memory of Jacques Ellul.¹ In spite of a silence of eleven years, from winter 1960 to winter 1971 with the creation of a column advertised as permanent by the editors, there is nothing occasional about either its length—forty-three years if we ignore the breaks—or its volume (twenty-five articles for a total of over 350 pages) or its content (particularly dense articles relating to fundamental issues in a style of great literary and poetic quality).

These articles may be divided into three main categories: “Chronique de l’An deux mille” [Chronicle of the Year 2000] (12), ecological issues strictly speaking outside the “Chronique” (3) and miscellaneous topics (10). Aside perhaps from the “Chronique de l’An deux mille” and with the exception of texts reissued later in book form, these articles for *Foi & Vie* make up the least-known part of a superabundant body of work still too often unknown to the general public. We are hypothesizing here that it is incumbent upon scholars to read Charbonneau's articles in this review, as for anyone who would undertake a systematic study of his work. For this series of articles is not redundant in relation to his work in book form, but completes it, throwing light on it both diachronically and synchronically; it is therefore worthy of serious consideration.² This also holds when an article published in *Foi & Vie* is partly or wholly included in a book published at a later date; the comparative study of the two versions is in my opinion a research topic

that is worthy of interest, since disparities sometimes involve key issues. For instance, for most readers, the agnosticism of the author of *Le Jardin de Babylone*³ [The Garden of Babylon] is a given. However, a careful study of these articles upsets our certainties in that area. As is well known, Charbonneau usually defines himself as “post-Christian” or agnostic. Now, it happens that in *Foi & Vie* he occasionally uses rather ambiguous wording that he sometimes takes out when the article gets integrated into a book.

Besides, is it not symptomatic that his first four articles in the Protestant review deal with metaphysical issues, not to say explicitly theological ones? Particularly for the second article, entitled “Progrès et liberté. I. La liberté des enfants de Dieu ou le progrès justifie Dieu. II. La sphère et la croix” (1957), as for his first published book,⁴ *Teilhard de Chardin, prophète d'un âge totalitaire* [Teilhard de Chardin, Prophet of a Totalitarian Age] (1963). His denunciation of modern myths and new forms of the sacred may also be viewed from that angle. We would like to apply here to Charbonneau the method he applied to Teilhard, namely, “as often as possible, to let him speak for himself”⁵ and confine ourselves, for the most part, to the review. Having to refrain from a systematic analysis of the twenty-five articles and their correlation with all the books, which would be the indispensable condition for drawing final conclusions, we will be formulating some simple hypotheses on the basis of extracts we deem significant enough to constitute an ideal type. We are well aware that this paper represents only a first stage that would deserve to be extended. To guide our process, we will rely on four of the five basic questions in Harold Lasswell’s model: Who is speaking, to whom? (I) To say what, and how? (II)

I. Just a Man, Talking to His Neighbor

When talking to his reader, Charbonneau often presents himself as a man—without (other) qualities—and he often does it in the first person singular since he, and he alone, is involved. Starting from his own experience, he is talking to the “few” once distinguished by two other famous Aquitainians, like him lovers of freedom: Étienne de la Boétie and Élisée Reclus. More precisely, he aims at what is unique in man: his freedom, that embodied freedom which founds his universality. We find a first example of this in the

first person singular declaration that serves as the first word of the article entitled “Only One Who Is Alive Can Die”⁶: “I was born, I love, and I will die: I cannot say anything more real, or truer [...].”

In the article published the following year, in 1960, entitled “Man in His Time and Place,” the use of “I” and “we” means that the author does not claim to stand as an impartial judge, a pure logician, or an objective sociologist. He does not intend to stand aloof, and, like Baudelaire,⁷ he tells his—“hypocritical reader,—my fellow,—my brother!”:

I cannot deny the enigma of time: this muffled shudder is not an abstraction, but the course of my life [...]. There even comes an age that realizes the disappearance of the present, that can no longer say: I live, but: I have lived; where nothing is certain, except that everything is already over.⁸

When we take a leap in time, and between literary genres, we realize that his posture never varied. This is confirmed by this excerpt of the warning that precedes the very first “Chronique de l’An deux mille,” in December 1971:

Convinced that there is in the heart of man an intangible treasure, and that he can save it or lose it, anchored in the torrent, I wonder where it comes from and where it is going: I question current events in order not to be swallowed up by them.⁹

We may incidentally notice that Bernard Charbonneau indirectly situates himself with respect to what he considers as opposite abdications that actually combine: the reactionary temptation of hanging on to the past, and the progressive illusion of adapting to the present.

When he comments on the declaration of the Fédération protestante de France entitled “Église et Pouvoirs” in 1972, he speaks of himself in the third person: “He is only talking in his own name. He is not a Christian, only post-Christian like everyone is more or less [...],”¹⁰ he thinks it fit to add. The author’s titles are thus listed negatively. “No more than he is a doctor in theology is he one in science or in sociology. He has no specialty and is not even a philosopher. He is but a man alone.” In the second “Chronique,” his subjectivity has not disappeared, even if it becomes more discreet. Referring to doses of radioactivity: “They tell me about rems, but

what do I know? I am reduced to trusting authorities as in olden times.”¹¹ And when he specifically talks to his Christian reader, he owns up not so much to his materialism as to his taste for life’s finer things:

I would answer him that if the Frenchman stands being deprived of bread and being given a flavorless lookalike, and if under the name of wine he is supplied with alcoholic fruit juice, tomorrow he will stand being deprived of a body in the name of profitable progress.¹²

On the material and spiritual planes, he always knows whereof he speaks, on his own behalf. Since chemistry is invading our plates, shouldn’t we communicate under the species of DDT and fuel oil? For, he writes, “it says somewhere that the Spirit became flesh. Not proteins.”¹³

In the preamble of his third “Chronique,” he defines his reader as his “mute companion,” apologizes to him for wandering “from the cellar to the attic of the house we temporarily inhabit.”¹⁴ And it is in the first person singular that he concludes his article by telling how, to live, he needs beauty as much as air. He wants to gaze at the blue of the sky through his window and not in a museum of modern art. And too bad for René Magritte’s skies and Yves Klein’s ultramarine blue; our Bearnese prefers his valley’s natural light. In the “Écologie et Théologie” special issue of *Foi & Vie*, he basically adopts a more distanced analytical viewpoint that allows him to offer a history, a survey of the different current trends within the ecological movement and different scenarios for the future, but he chooses to conclude his article in the first person.¹⁵ Whether he uses “I” or “we,” Charbonneau is always talking to every “one.” He expresses this very clearly in his sixth “Chronique”: “My reader (I have only one, but even if there were many, s/he is unique) [...]”¹⁶ From this standpoint, there is a perfect congruence with the approach set out in his essay on freedom. In the few lines set as an epigraph to *Je fus* [I Was],¹⁷ a book written in the early 1950s, the author explained that his work was dedicated to no one: “It is written for a person whose name I do not know.” And after having mentioned, in the first person singular, the cup of wine that gave him birth and of which he is dying, he declares that it is dedicated to his neighbor. The first line of the same work’s beginning also uses the first person singular to address the reader: “In this book I will speak of freedom . . .”

This allows us to tackle now the content that remains inseparable from the form of his discourse, since it is understood that from the writer's standpoint it is not a matter of any kind of literary or philosophical discourse, but of embodied thought.

II. "To Know Freedom, One Must Have Lost It"¹⁸

The tone is given in 1951 from the first article, entitled "Render unto Caesar."¹⁹ Referring to the rift characterizing the Christian's life in a world that is no longer Christian, Charbonneau reminds the believer that "the scandal of an infinite spirit never manifests as much as when it must be embodied in a finite world!" We note here the presence of a formula that will reappear later on in various guises and in other contexts. Its author is essentially telling us that in this seemingly rationalized and disenchanted world, a religious yearning, a need for Truth, live on, finding expression by way of State-worship and nationalistic idolatry.

It is however with the second article, six years later, entitled "Progress and Freedom," that the style of his commentary is definitively established. "The awakening of Christian conscience can only be that of the contradiction between an infinite demand and a finite existence."²⁰ A style that displays three characteristics: the priority of maxim-like statements and aphorisms over logical demonstration, a concern for concision when it comes to substance and for symmetry when it comes to form, use of figures of speech allowing him to underline the parallelism of ideas, as here with the use of assonance, a figure of speech based on the resonance between certain sounds.²¹ With Teilhard de Chardin's theology, he attacks one of those "giants that signal the end of a species," to borrow his own terms. It is difficult to imagine today how large the author of *Le Phénomène humain* [The Phenomenon of Man] (1955) loomed after the Liberation of France, well beyond Catholic circles. While a go-to monthly review for the educated public,²² *La Table Ronde*, had devoted to him a special issue that came across as a protracted paean, the popular daily *France-Soir* took up theology for the occasion. It is thus because he sees in him a social fact, a symptom even, that Charbonneau undertakes to deconstruct him. He characterizes his system as one of the most monstrous ever devised by man. Teilhard being a Jesuit father

and paleontologist, “his trade and his order’s tradition drew him to elevate evolution to the level of a theology.”²³ As a man of God and of science, he has a basic intuition of Oneness. “Here below as in God, nothing is separate, and nothing is lost: everything proceeds from a supreme Center where everything ends up.” He gives Teilhard credit for having felt the Christian’s discomfort in the modern world, condemned to choose between betraying the world and betraying God. Because religion has become separated from life and life from religion, Teilhard endeavors to bring a religion to Science and a certain knowledge to the Church. Formerly, the Christian faith had known how to do a synthesis between Aristotelianism and Renaissance humanism; according to him, a new synthesis was called for to reconcile the spirit and matter. If Teilhard agrees with biologist Julian Huxley’s formula “Man is nothing more than Evolution become conscious of itself,” Charbonneau does not subscribe to the concepts of “noosphere” and “cosmic Christ,” to this capitalized thinking that views the life of concrete people “as it might be seen by an aviator flying in the stratosphere.” It is in the final analysis a pure system of justification that, pretending to bring together the sphere and the cross, threatens man’s free will.

“Only One Who Is Alive Can Die” also deals with man and God, since “after the death of God, the last sacred is the death of man.”²⁴ It is in this that Charbonneau functions like an agnostic theologian, in that he questions modern myths, explores new territories of the sacred. We find under his pen many figures of speech. Ellipsis: “*One* does not die, only someone does.”²⁵ Paradox, by far his favorite figure: “But man refuses death at the same time as he discovers it.”²⁶ “Death is never natural.”²⁷ “To the despair of one who has nothing more to expect is added the anguish of the one who has everything to fear.”²⁸ “Flight before death goes hand in hand with morbid tastes.”²⁹ “Life means death: corpses do not know it. The acknowledgment of death is the condition for any rebellion against it.”³⁰ And finally, what amounts to one of the key ideas of this article: “The whole greatness of man being born strictly from his whole wretchedness.”³¹ This formula reminds one of Boileau’s about a proud but penniless nobleman, forced into an alliance with the bourgeois, who thus “restores his honor by dint of villainy.”³² The distance between the rhetorical paradox that can spark reflection and paradoxism bordering on the oxymoron, in Fontanier’s sense, is

sometimes slim. We may then be put in mind of two illustrious forerunners: Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (“Everything has to change so that nothing changes”) and Jacques Prévert (“Paris is tiny, that is its true greatness”).

After having observed a correlation between the lengthening of lifespans and a trend for the acceptance of euthanasia, Charbonneau tells us in essence that (awareness of) death is consubstantial with (awareness of) freedom. The death of God was supposed to emancipate man, but it ushered in a new faith: the cult of material progress, centralized organization, and economic efficiency: “The totalitarian State is a byproduct of our denial of death.”³³ We must therefore desacralize them both, bring back the end to the means. Man does not actually fear death but the anxiety it triggers, since it forces us to “finally be born to our personal life.”³⁴ Paradoxically, it is through the awareness of our physical death that we reach our spiritual truth. Living with this unbearable reality, “this madness that nothing justifies,” is the hallmark of the human condition. Underlining the fundamental ambivalence of life and death, Charbonneau waxes lyrical:

This point of bitterness within sweetness, that is the salt of life; from the purple of this wound bleeds the dawn of all life. Divine summer evening, you go down; and this ray of glory with which you pierce me is the cry of your agony.³⁵

He goes on to specify that it is because we know our days to be numbered that we must save ourselves from death, through our life, and not just at the moment of death. An idea he would develop at length in “Man in His Time and Place.”³⁶ This democracy of death is thus the only universality that can bring us together while preserving our differences. The last paragraph is entirely devoted to the Christian God, and it is unsettling to realize not only that its author does not stray from the biblical story but also that he does not bother to distance himself from the supernatural phenomenon of the resurrection. After recalling the famous cry *Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?,” he concludes as follows: “Where the son of God has gone, every man must go; because he was born, but also because he must be reborn. The one who lives, dies: but the grave is the place of the resurrection.”³⁷

His posture actually appears to be strictly agnostic insofar as it does not decide one way or another. If we recall ethnologist Jean Pouillon's statement, "It is only the unbeliever who believes that the believer believes,"³⁸ and we are willing to admit that the atheist too believes—in the non-existence of God—Charbonneau is leaving the door open to both beliefs in "Man in His Time and Place":

As for Christ's call, the individual awakens, nostalgia for eternity swells in him [...]. But does the Infinite belong to God or to man? [...] The Time and Space of Science *do not exist*: they only exist, with Creation, through a Creator. [...] this immensity is not on our scale. Only a divine presence could people it.³⁹

However, he uses a most ambiguous wording when, having reminded the reader that memory is indispensable to the construction of personhood, he adds: "and to the preservation of man as created by God."⁴⁰ This article devoted to the paradox of time and space also tackles four significant topics: overpopulation, mass tourism, acceleration, and rootedness. Charbonneau takes up positions that could be termed neo-Malthusian eight years before Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*, published by the Sierra Club in 1968 in the USA and by the Friends of the Earth in France in 1971.⁴¹ "Human space is condensed in a finite and overpopulated globe"⁴²; "man will disappear in a concentration world, overpopulated and overorganized"⁴³; "the greatest number accumulates in overpopulated and overorganized societies"⁴⁴; "We are all there, one against the other."⁴⁵ "Besides, we are far too many [...]. Thus, in those overpopulated cities where space is sold at astronomical rates,"⁴⁶ "our concentration worlds eliminate freedom by crowding individuals [...]. Less population density is called for," concludes the author who favors the house over the apartment block, the town over the city. Be he a sailor, a nomad, or a highlander, the freeman used to roam through space, while nowadays "the mass of tourists has followed the vanguard of explorers."⁴⁷ We no longer have time to wait for whatever comes, Hakka migrants and Occitan shopkeepers crisscross the same planet. "Machines that help us cross space also raise the obstacles that make them impossible to cross. [...] The means that allow us to flee allow us to be pursued even faster."⁴⁸ This vein would be explored in *Le Jardin de Babylone*: "The crowd flees the crowd, civilized people flee civilization. Thus it comes about

that nature disappears, destroyed by the very sense that caused it to be discovered. [...] Because machines exist, man flees the machine on his machine.”⁴⁹ Charbonneau is a past master at the art of ellipsis or anacoluthon: “For at the same time as the city, the need to get out of it develops.”⁵⁰ He is convinced that the sense of duration will run out more and more in a world where time accelerates.⁵¹ In this stream that swirls faster and faster, we are losing our footing. But if technique makes us save time to roam space, “time and space flee us at the speed of lightning, when we run after them at the speed of a thunderbolt.”⁵² We lack time, but when we do have it, we have to kill it. Our leisure is more exhausting than the flight we practice in our work, and the pensioner’s agenda is fuller than the prime minister’s. The airplane mystifies, because however smaller it makes the world, it is only geographic distance that it eliminates and not that separating us from strangers. Like Jesus, “we have nowhere to lay our head anymore, we are perpetually on the way to somewhere else,”⁵³ says Charbonneau as he praises the virtues of rootedness. But beware, his conception of the homeland is not identitarian, because man finds it again only at the end of a long quest.⁵⁴ While the modern world attacks man from two apparently contradictory angles, by attaching him to material goods on the one hand and by cutting off this soulless body from any deep relationship with nature on the other hand, Charbonneau defines freedom as the faculty “to root oneself in a place instead of getting scattered on the surface.”⁵⁵ If we want to go beyond our sterile agitation, we must first find a homeland, but “any find is the fruit of a quest.” If we do not find it in our workplace, travel can become the occasion of a “slow and in-depth search for a place where we might durably stop.” Freedom is to be risked as much as it is to be located. It assumes a minimum of space, but so that man have a minimum of place; “he needs too much: in his country and in his house,” while everywhere our societies pile up individuals. It is only with a less dense population and a reinvented economy that man may find again the road to freedom. Charbonneau is telling us in essence that one must first find one’s port of call in order to profitably travel, and to feel like opening the door to strangers.

Finally, let us imagine the improbable hypothesis of an exclusive reader of *Foi & Vie*, without radio, newspapers, or television; he could not have failed to know that in the early 1970s there appeared a new social fact: the

emergence of an environmental movement. Thanks to Charbonneau and his “Chronique de l’An deux mille” launched as early as 1971, as well as three in-depth articles (1974, 1977, 1988) devoted especially to this topic, this imaginary reader has in the person of the author of *The Green Light* a choice informant, able to give him inside knowledge about a movement of which he was an active member, but also able to cast on it the gaze of an outsider, since he refused to be called an “ecologist.” With the benefit of hindsight, let us reconstruct today the main outlines of his argumentation by taking three themes as a red thread: Christianity’s responsibility for the environmental crisis, naturist fundamentalism, and the risk of ecofascism. The term “ecologist” makes it possible to refer to a rebellion against exponential development but also, by its scientific form, to reintegrate it within the system it threatens. This word is too reductive to refer to the relationship between man and nature. Man cannot destroy nature without destroying himself, for all his joys are given to him by the earth he inhabits. The great novelty of this conserving—if not conservative—movement is that it adopts a revolutionary tone. Non-Marxist leftism thus reconnects with Rousseauist tradition and its libertarian dream of a happy and simple life. By driving Zeus out of Olympus, by desacralizing the Cosmos, by presenting nature as a creation of God, and by making man, created in his image, his vicar on earth, Christianity has enabled science to take hold of a profaned object. Spiritual mastery having preceded practical mastery, Christianity’s bent has been to forget that creation was the work of God. For it has unleashed the will to knowledge and to power characterizing what is called in the West “modernity.” Charbonneau is referring not only to the theses of American historian Lynn White⁵⁶ but to those of Bavarian writer and ecologist Carl Amery,⁵⁷ his colleague at ECOROPA. He however counters this line of thinking by pointing to the Christian tradition that makes man the master of nature and not its creator, so that he is not entrusted with destroying his kingdom but with transmitting it to his descendants. Without citing him, he joins Ellul in reminding readers that this tradition condemns the obsession with knowing and exploiting, the will to power, while it glorifies poverty, humility, frugality. It is even the fragile beauty of the lilies of the field that is offered as a model in the Gospel. It is also the West that has invented scientific ecology, just as Protestantism has spawned

feeling for nature and the first conservancy associations. And Charbonneau underlines the paradox of things with the paradox of words: “The same society that destroys the Indian along with the buffalo cries out about his disappearance.”⁵⁸ We have questioned above the agnosticism claimed by the author. Let us then underline this statement from 1988, in his very last article devoted to nature to appear in the Protestant review: “Christianity is at once responsible for the devastation of nature in West and East, and the bearer of the only force that might end it.”⁵⁹ In other words, the solution to the environmental crisis does not reside in what he denounces as a naturist fundamentalism, illustrated, for example, by Swiss naturist Robert Hainard. Christianity having chosen culture against nature, post-Christian societies have spawned a naturism replicating the original matrix. The default attitude of the so-called ecological movement is a rehashed paganism, a kind of pantheism issuing in a cult of necessity, an *amor fati*, to speak like Nietzsche, causing the person, divine or human, to disappear within the totality of the group or of nature. For the author of the 1986 books *Le Miracle d’être* [The Miracle of Being] and *Le Guetteur de lune* [The Moon Watcher], nature is a goddess who must be protected at any cost from its fiercest enemies: beginning with the Christian, the agriculturalist, and hence the ordinary man, whom it would be best to keep at a distance from authentic nature reserves, open only to a few accredited specialists and VIPs. Regardless of his esteem for these naturists as pioneering environmentalists, Charbonneau rebels against this willingness to put small pieces of wilderness under a dome the better to lay waste to the whole of nature, that is, to modern man’s true environment in techno-industrial societies. Now it is not by eliminating man that we will save nature, which is none other than the fruit of human creation, but by reintroducing him into the equation. The “system” may just as well accommodate naturist ghettos as organic aisles.

Finally, as a risk that Charbonneau anticipates as early as 1974, an “ecofascism” may arise as a result of a catastrophe or crisis, organizing “the great communion of the horde under its leaders.”⁶⁰ He develops this hypothesis further three years later when ecological candidates rake in 7 percent of votes in Paris and 10 percent in Alsace. “Summoned to think in a house that is beginning to burn,”⁶¹ in the face of the environmental emergency, we must hurry slowly if we want to avoid crashing. The U-turn must be

performed smoothly. "It is impossible to have indefinitely accelerated development within finite space."⁶² Growth leads to a dead end, to be sure, but we are at risk of one day running out as much of freedom and equality as of oxygen. "Ecofascism is a less distant possibility than we might believe: saving the common good, the earth and man, is well worth sacrificing freedom to it as in wartime."⁶³ An idea to be put in parallel with one of the theses set out before in his critique of the ecological movement. It is not so much the planet as freedom and equality that social organization threatens.

For governments will increasingly find themselves compelled to act in order to manage dwindling resources and space. [...] It will be possible to ensure the preservation of the oxygen level needed for life only if another vital fluid is sacrificed, namely freedom.⁶⁴

Charbonneau for his part refuses to choose between chaos and system.⁶⁵ The defense of nature that he means to promote is also that of equality within freedom, of the life-world against industrial totalitarianism, of what exists against utopia, of the *topos* against the abstract.

Conclusions

Bernard Charbonneau most often presents himself as "one man among others."⁶⁶ He certainly was not the first to use the first person singular, but, unlike St. Augustine, if he too discloses his truth unadorned, he never confesses a personal God to better edify the faithful. Like his countryman Montaigne, his tone is often ironic or even caustic, but it is sterner, and above all, clearly more nostalgic. If he shares with him the existential "I," he keeps a good distance from Descartes's metaphysical *ego*. Unlike the author of the *Metaphysical Meditations*, Charbonneau could not maintain, "I am only a thing that thinks." He even twists the famous "I think, therefore I am" into "I am only if I think," or even, "You do not think, therefore you are not" for, as Charbonneau would say, if I just think about it, I discover that my thinking is not personal. At three centuries' remove, he asked himself the same questions as Blaise Pascal—a careful reader of Montaigne—about time and space, but he has not made his own the wager of the author of the *Pensées*. As for Rousseau, he definitely prefers "Jean-Jacques," but unlike him, does not wear his bleeding heart in a cast. If he anticipates Proust's Swann,

the author of *Confessions* has the twin faults of self-indulgently scratching his wound and of reserving democracy for a people of gods. Like Nietzsche, Charbonneau has a poetic prose style and a taste for aphorisms but does not share his understanding of man. He often shares Jean Giono's lyricism, but he mocks the soothing character of his bucolic literature. In short, if one absolutely had to find him a predecessor, if not an inspirer, one might have to look to Kierkegaard. Does not the author of *Fear and Trembling* also reject the status of a philosopher? Is the Bearnese not, like the Dane, a kind of "dialectician-poet," a lover of paradoxes, a mere "amateur writer" offering no system of thought? However, Kierkegaard's name appears only very rarely under Charbonneau's pen, while he presents himself as neither a gambler nor a jumper (as in the knight of faith's famous leap). A way of saying that faith in God separates him from Pascal as much as from Kierkegaard,⁶⁷ even if some doubt remains.

We therefore need to continue to put into perspective the articles Charbonneau published in *Foi & Vie* with the whole of his work if we want to hazard a few hypotheses. After *Je fus*⁶⁸ and *Une Seconde nature* (1981), reading his third and last opus about freedom⁶⁹ allows us to rule out for good the thesis of an opportunistic Charbonneau who serves up to his readers the refrains familiar to them. His articles for *Foi & Vie* are aimed at a mostly Christian public whose culture, history, axiology, and expectations he knows but which he offers to regenerate and sublimate. The metaphysical problems tackled in his first articles in the Protestant review correspond to his lifetime of existential probing. His central intuition to the effect that the accelerated development of sciences and techniques threatens man's freedom as much as the balance of living beings must not make us forget the fact that his whole reasoning is inscribed within the framework of a society that he defines as "post-Christian." The concept owes nothing to improvisation, for it equally rejects the labels "pagan" and "Christian."⁷⁰ It implies a genuine integration of Christianity, not as an ethos in daily life in all its demandingness, nor as an in-depth cultural appropriation of its values, its rites, and its rules, but as a living and unsurpassable legacy, as he warns that any attempt to go back to pantheism, by way of some kind of naturist fundamentalism, can only issue in new forms of barbarism.⁷¹

Moreover, Charbonneau's entire work assumes a good knowledge of the Bible, since direct or indirect references to the Gospel in particular abound.⁷² When, on the question of freedom, Charbonneau chooses for himself four unimpeachable witnesses so as not to incur the charge of excessive subjectivism, it is after all within the Christian tradition that he situates himself. Breaking with a chronological exposition, he presents Rousseau before Montaigne. As a son of the Calvinist Rome who spent most of his life in Catholic lands, a faithful and unfaithful heir of the Gospel *intus et in cute*, as Charbonneau likes to put it, this citizen of Geneva is sometimes regarded as the Antichrist. The realization of the social contract, as described by Rousseau, demands exceptional qualities that are out of reach of most mortals. Charbonneau prefers to him Montaigne, who always judges at a human level, and he identifies with Pascal identifying with Montaigne. "It is not in Montaigne but in me that I find all that I see in him."⁷³ Do not their respective cases sum up the human condition? In the author of the *Essays*, Charbonneau likes this quest of the embodied individual, this unadorned presentation of a strongly individualized humanity, this invitation to be oneself by way of self-examination. He shares with him this vision of man as an unfinished and imperfect being, unable to reach the infinite that is the preserve of God. A God one reaches through communion, the recitation of the Our Father, and not through logical demonstration.

In the Russian personalist Berdyaev, Charbonneau likes that the priority granted to the subject does not deny the ties uniting it to the universe, to nature, to society, to God if he has faith, but makes them paradoxical. For Charbonneau, however, the individual always comes first, because there cannot be a God if there is not first someone to know him, whereas the author of *Slavery and Freedom* (1944) emphasizes the person, understood as a mainly axiological category and thus beyond the reach of most flesh-and-blood individuals. It is not for nothing that Charbonneau reminds Berdyaev in particular and Christians in general of the meaning of the parable of the Good Shepherd (Matt 18:12–13). If it may appear paradoxical for him to leave his watch over ninety-nine sheep to find the hundredth one that got lost, it is indeed because, unlike other religions, Christianity means to rely on freedom of the individual. The Son of Man has come to save what was lost.

It is especially when Charbonneau tackles Dostoevsky that we realize how much a good knowledge of the Bible is required for anyone who wishes to grasp the richness of his thought. In the same way, it is necessary to bear in mind Matthew 4:1–11 or Luke 4:1–13 when reading the parable of the Grand Inquisitor if one does not want to remain content with a superficial reading of this crucial passage of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Ivan, the atheist, imagines for his monk brother that Christ comes back down to earth in Seville at the time of the Inquisition and that he resurrects a child. He is then immediately arrested and jailed by the cardinal, who wants to demonstrate to him that he has no business on earth, for by bringing freedom to men, Jesus plunges them into turmoil and unhappiness. In the Gospel, when he is faced in turn by the three great temptations, Jesus answers Satan each time, whereas in Ivan's poem he remains silent, and the Grand Inquisitor does not even realize that he is soliloquizing. What fascinates Charbonneau in this moral tale is not so much how Dostoevsky's characters are constantly troubled by their inability to practice their Christian faith as it demands, but the expression of the strictly insoluble contradictions of the human condition. In the final analysis, the crux of his entire œuvre is the tension between man's duty to live his freedom to be a man and the impossibility of succeeding in this. It would have been enough for Jesus to yield to the three forces—wonders, mystery, and power—able to bind men for them to find the road to happiness, albeit of a satanic happiness. For Charbonneau, by purporting to love men more than himself, Jesus is asking too much of them by giving them a freedom that is beyond them. The Grand Inquisitor thinks that they must be commanded, reassured, and distracted, like the children that they are. The Christian Revelation gives the human species a challenge that is too much for it. The image that comes back many times under the pen of Dostoevsky's interpreter is that Jesus put the bar too high. The divine demand is above our strength. "Are we up to converting to the call of a God of freedom without being supported by faith in a God-man?,"⁷⁴ Charbonneau asks himself, as the unwelcome and inflexible witness of the painful comparison between a past where the God of Christians became man and a present where man makes himself a god. When Charbonneau ends up calling Dostoevsky a "Christian atheist," we may think of this as a self-portrait if we recall that, agnostic though he was,

he nevertheless recited the Our Father every evening from his early youth to his last breath.⁷⁵

Translated by Christian Roy.

Notes

1. Archivist Roland de Miller has established a nearly exhaustive bibliography of his publications that can be found as an appendix to Jacques Prades, ed., *Bernard Charbonneau: une vie entière à dénoncer la grande imposture* (Toulouse: Erès, 1997): 213–20.
2. The article “Rendez à César” is a kind of summary of the theses of *L'État* (1951). It would be worth comparing line by line “L'Homme en son temps et dans son lieu” (1960), reissued in book form by R&N in 2017, with many chapters of *Je fus* (1980), “L'Adieu aux armes” (1982), “Sur *Belle du Seigneur* d'Albert Cohen” (1989) with *Finis Terrae* (2010), the “Chroniques de l'An deux mille” with *Le Feu vert* (1980; *The Green Light*, 2018).
3. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973).
4. The manuscript of *Par la force des choses* is thought to have been completed in 1948. See Daniel Cérézuelle, *Écologie et liberté: Bernard Charbonneau précurseur de l'écologie politique* (Lyon: Paragon/Vs, 2006).
5. Bernard Charbonneau, “Progrès et liberté.” *Foi & Vie* 56 (1957), 495.
6. Bernard Charbonneau, “Seul meurt le vivant.” *Foi & Vie* 58.1 (Jan.–Feb. 1959): 44–61, which makes up chapter 5 of the first part of the book *Je fus*.
7. Charles Baudelaire, “Au lecteur” in *Les Fleurs du mal* [1857] (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1964), 34.
8. Bernard Charbonneau, “L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu.” *Foi & Vie* 59.5 (Sept.–Oct. 1960), 321. This article was partially merged into chapter 3 of the first part of the book *Je fus*.
9. Bernard Charbonneau, “Chronique de l'An deux mille.” *Foi & Vie* 70.6 (Dec. 1971): 40–59.
10. Bernard Charbonneau, “Le regard de l'autre.” *Foi & Vie* 71.2–3 (Mar.–June 1972): 103–10.
11. Bernard Charbonneau, “Chronique de l'An deux mille.” *Foi & Vie* 71.6 (Dec. 1972), 90.
12. *Ibid.*, 95.

13. *Ibid.*, 95.
14. Bernard Charbonneau, "Chronique de l'An deux mille." *Foi & Vie* 72.5–6 (Dec. 1973), 73.
15. Bernard Charbonneau, "Un nouveau fait social: Le mouvement écologique." *Foi & Vie* 73.5–6 (Dec. 1974): 82–92.
16. Bernard Charbonneau, "Chronique de l'An deux mille." *Foi & Vie* 75.5–6 (Dec. 1976), 97.
17. Bernard Charbonneau, *Je fus: Essai sur la liberté* [1980] (Bordeaux: Opales, 2000).
18. Charbonneau, *Je fus*, 18.
19. Bernard Charbonneau, "Rendez à César." *Foi & Vie* 67.2 (Mar. 1951): 137–61.
20. Charbonneau, "Progrès et liberté," 493.
21. Pierre Fontanier, *Les figures du discours* [1818–1830] (Paris: Champs/Flammarion, 1977). We thus may think here of his other formula, one that would later become very successful: "We cannot continue an infinite development in a finite world."
22. Editorial Committee: Raymond Aron, Albert Camus, André Malraux, Thierry Maulnier, Jean Paulhan, Denis de Rougemont, Jules Roy, Henri Troyat, then François Mauriac, Gabriel Marcel, Jean Mistler, Jacques Duhamel, Charles Oren-go, Roland Laudenbach.
23. Bernard Charbonneau, "Progrès et liberté," 494.
24. Charbonneau, "Seul meurt le vivant," 44.
25. *Ibid.*, 44.
26. *Ibid.*, 47.
27. *Ibid.*, 49.
28. *Ibid.*, 50.
29. *Ibid.*, 56.
30. *Ibid.*, 56.
31. *Ibid.*, 57.
32. Fontanier, *Les figures du discours*, 138.
33. Charbonneau, "Seul meurt le vivant," 52.
34. *Ibid.*, 57.
35. *Ibid.*, 57.

36. Charbonneau, "L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu," 320–22.
37. *Ibid.*, 61 and *Je fus*, 99.
38. Jean Pouillon, *Le Cru et le su* (Paris: Seuil, 1993).
39. Charbonneau, "L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu," 322–24, 327.
40. *Ibid.*, 338.
41. Translator's note: Bernard Charbonneau questioned even more pointedly the biblical command to "be fruitful and multiply" (asking if that was an order) a few weeks later in another Protestant periodical whose pages Ellul opened to him: "Le Problème de la limitation des naissances. 'Croissez et multipliez.' Est-ce un ordre?" *Réforme* 16.824 (Dec. 31, 1960): 6–7.
42. Charbonneau, "L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu," 319.
43. *Ibid.*, 320.
44. *Ibid.*, 327.
45. *Ibid.*, 334.
46. *Ibid.*, 334.
47. *Ibid.*, 323.
48. *Ibid.*, 334.
49. Charbonneau, *Le Jardin de Babylone*, 10.
50. *Ibid.*
51. Charbonneau, "L'Homme en son temps et en son lieu," 319.
52. *Ibid.*, 329.
53. *Ibid.*, 335.
54. *Ibid.*, 327.
55. *Ibid.*, 339.
56. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis." *Science* 155.3767 (Mar. 10, 1967): 1203–207.
57. Carl Amery, *Das Ende der Vorsehung. Die gnadenlosen Folgen des Christentums* [The End of Providence: The Merciless Consequences of Christianity] (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1972). Translator's note: The contrasting reception of the French translation of Carl Amery's book (*Fin de la Providence* [Paris: Seuil, 1976]) by Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau is examined in the second section of Christian

- Roy, "Nature and Scripture in Bernard Charbonneau's *The Green Light*." *Ellul Forum* 64 (Fall 2019): 5–16.
58. Bernard Charbonneau, "Quel avenir pour quelle écologie?" *Foi & Vie* 87.3–4 (July 1988), 131.
 59. *Ibid.*, 133.
 60. Bernard Charbonneau, "Un nouveau fait social: le mouvement écologique." *Foi & Vie* 73.5–6 (Dec. 1974), 91.
 61. Bernard Charbonneau, "Problèmes théoriques et pratiques du mouvement écologique." *Foi & Vie* 76.2–3 (before 1977), 113. Jean-Paul Deléage, founder of the review *Écologie & Politique*, is widely regarded as the originator of the statement made by President Jacques Chirac in 2002, during the Johannesburg Earth Summit: "Our house is burning, and we look elsewhere."
 62. Charbonneau, "Quel avenir pour quelle écologie?," 114.
 63. *Ibid.*, 115.
 64. Bernard Charbonneau, *The Green Light: A Self-Critique of the Ecological Movement* [1980], trans. Christian Roy (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 84–85.
 65. Bernard Charbonneau, *Le Système et le Chaos* [1973, subtitled *Critique du développement exponentiel*] (Paris: Economica, 1990).
 66. Charbonneau, *The Green Light*, xxxv.
 67. On the affinities between Pascal and Kierkegaard, and in particular on their peculiar relationship to Christianity, see André Clair, "Pascal et Kierkegaard face à face." *Études philosophiques* 96.1 (2011): 3–18.
 68. Written for the most part in the early 1950s, *Je fus: Essai sur la liberté* was privately printed in 1980 before it was finally published in Bordeaux by Opales in 2000.
 69. Bernard Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté: Rousseau, Montaigne, Berdiaev, Dostoïevski* (Paris: R&N, 2019). Daniel Cérézuelle mentions in his foreword that this book was written "in the evening of his life."
 70. *Ibid.*, 123.
 71. Bernard Charbonneau, "Christianisme, science et technique, sectes et écologie." *Combat Nature* 110 (Aug. 1995), 47 (included under the new title "Raison scientifique et réaction sectaire" in Bernard Charbonneau, *Le totalitarisme industriel* [Paris: L'Échappée, 2019], 109–11).
 72. Frédéric Rognon, "Bernard Charbonneau et le christianisme." Paper given at the conference *Liberté, nature et politique à l'ère de l'Anthropocène : Actualité de la*

pensée de Bernard Charbonneau, Institut d'Études Politiques de Bordeaux, November 21–22, 2019.

73. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Lafuma edition, 689), cited in Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, 65.
74. Charbonneau, *Quatre témoins de la liberté*, 139.
75. On this point see Sébastien Morillon-Brière, “Bernard Charbonneau–Jacques Ellul: correspondance de jeunesse (1933–1946).” *Foi & Vie* 1 (Mar. 2012): 55–62. Translator’s note: A key to this seeming paradox may be provided by Charbonneau on the page facing his lengthy quotation of Montaigne’s defense of the Our Father as the one needful prayer that could dispense with all others, suitable for every occasion of any given day, when he describes in the third person a clearly personal experience: “The spiritual foundation of a man and of his world is not invented, it reaches him from a deep origin that is beyond time; and if it is revealed to him, it is not through some earthly authority, but in the silence and the night of a solitary prayer” (*Quatre témoins de la liberté*, 71–72), like the one he is known to have made as a child in his room, promising this unknown ground of his being and of his need for freedom to address it as Our Father every remaining night of his long life.

Review of Jacques Ellul: *A Companion to His Major Works*

David Lovekin

Van Vleet, Jacob E., and Jacob Marques Rollison. *Jacques Ellul: A Companion to His Major Works*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020, 196 pp.

Jacques Ellul is an enigma, claiming to be a one-book author. What, then, to make of the some fifty other books and the thousand essays of biblical, sociological, and historical studies? One approach follows Ellul's claim that the modern age suffers from an anxiety over God's absence and that the technological society is the attempt to find meaning in this absence. Science and technology since 1750 extolled the virtues of reason, progress, and method, and religion and the humanities were challenged to mend their ways of superstition and ornament. Technology, or *la technique* in Ellul's sense, is a mentality that breaks with science in the twentieth century by trumping the virtues of efficiency over reason and method. The state and the system that technology has become is sustained by cacophonies of propaganda, illusion, and irrelevance. Technology then becomes the new sacred, an absolute in a supposedly secular and freedom-loving age. Irrationality, regression, and chaos have been the result. A reliance on natural resources has led to their depletion and decay, and the promise of political freedom has taken an abrupt turn, for example in the rise of a skewed nationalism, xenophobia, and resentment. The openness and creativity that prompted initial technological and scientific investigations is constrained and debilitated by procedures, clichés, and tweets. The rules of law and method have emptied into a dizzying relativity, into the ethos of what Ellul called *n'importe quoi*, or "whatever." A successful social milieu provides a center, a sense of place, a guide for meaningful action, ritual, and a feeling

of community. Instead, in the technological society, anxiety, insecurity, and alienation abide.

Ellul's sociological and theological studies are mutually supportive and broadly based, although sociology and theology do not adequately describe Ellul's path. He is influenced notably but not exclusively by Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Reinhold Niebuhr, but also by Søren Kierkegaard, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. We should remember his remark that introduces his extensive bibliography in *The Technological Society*: books are meant to be read and not consulted. Jacob E. Van Vleet and Jacob Marques Rollison in *Jaques Ellul: A Companion to His Major Works* have provided a valuable tool for a reading of Ellul's works. They examine the following: *Presence in the Modern World*; *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective*; *The Meaning of the City*; *Hope in Time of Abandonment*; *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*; *To Will and to Do* (and his ethics); *The Technological Society*; *Propaganda: The Formation of Human Attitudes*; *The Political Illusion*; *Autopsy of Revolution*; *The New Demons*; and *The Humiliation of the Word*. Six theological works are balanced against six sociological studies, although *Humiliation* fits in both areas. Van Vleet and Rollison provide a companion for visiting some of Ellul's work. As Ellul often asks: "Is it so, or not?" In this spirit I will engage the *Companion* with page references to that work.

For Ellul, the Bible reveals God's word without actually being that word (38). The Bible provides a symbolic narrative of Christ's life and teaching with the understanding that Christ is at once a man and God's incarnation (42–43, 63). Thus the Bible is not a machine to be manipulated by the literal minded. Ellul's observations are often in metaphors, indeed, the language of the Bible. In the world but not of the world, the Christian is salt, a flavoring and a preservative, a light that illuminates the many illusions and idolatries of the world, and a lamb in the role of sacrifice among wolves to adopt the values of community and non-violence (11–12). The Christian refuses to be trapped in the various necessities of time, such as fatality and death, to live a life that is valuable in itself and not as a mere means to an end (15–23). The Bible is read as a unified whole that embraces the many contradictions and tensions that arise between humanity and God, humanity and humanity, and humanity and the city or place of dwelling. God allows the human to choose and offers possibilities like the city for that

freedom to manifest, but the human rebels and establishes its own necessities such as technology, efficiency, money, and a politics that supports them. God's offering of freedom and presence as Wholly Other is denied (40–44).

The city is born in violence, with Cain as its architect (38), and is sustained by it to become an absolute like technology, which, too, is a continuous, reciprocal (“eye for an eye”) sameness proclaiming noble ends with a tiresome rationality where identities exclude differences (31–36). Once used, a means like poison gas becomes the standard, until other more efficient methodologies are established. Means become ends. Efficiency is the watchword and is the fetish that supports violence both physically and psychologically promulgating fear and hatred (29). In denial we may find affirmation; a denial of God or gods typically establishes false gods or the desire to become God itself. Desire and anxiety bed together. But like Christ who is God and not God but God's presence, and who felt God's abandonment on the cross, the human must find a place among others and before the Wholly Other while feeling abandoned. God's ways were and are mysterious but never without signs, symbols, and prospects for hope (47–49). This hope is founded in the understanding that God is a God of love and that redemption is forever possible (67). Love is the real violence as an opposition to violence in the embrace of Otherness (36).

Hope (*espérance*) is not wishful thinking (54–56) but a perseverance against existential odds, aided by prayer, not as a “heavenly telephone” but as a “fearful engagement with the divine” (50). Ellul's theology proceeds by faith and by careful textual readings set in historical contexts but not limited by them. His theology is not established by abstract theological arguments. He adopts Kierkegaard's view, certainly a fearful thinker, that the eternal is revealed in time and that Christ's messages are forever relevant, given the power to see and to hear them, embedded as they are in contradiction and irony and in the development of an expanded self (63–64). The Christian, in Ellul's sense, has to be ready to transcend the ethical, social strictures, as Kierkegaard saw in the story of Abraham as a teleological suspension of the ethical. *A priori* rules may obscure the encounter with an embodied eternal. Ellul finds in the Apocalypse a renewed relevance for the four horses: the white horse is still God's word, but the black horse as famine becomes the economic; the red horse, war, becomes the state and political power; and

the pale horse remains death (62–65). These are the powers revealed in the scroll of history that revitalize the Christian need to engage the whole symbolic structure of the Bible. Christ is the center, God’s embodiment, eternal and present, that brings the church through history beyond the recounting of facts, dates, events (58–63). The treatment of the Apocalypse in the *Companion* is a reminder of the complexity of Ellul’s work and its subject.

Ellul’s ethics was a work in progress. “Morality is made in a fallen world, the world of necessity,” the *Companion* states (75). And yet we must act. “The true good is the will of God” (82), we read, which leaves the human, again, in the presence of the Other. Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit, faith has it, is biblically revealed to a person who is a member of a community in a particular immediacy at a specific point in time fraught with contradictions (78–79). Therefore, the truth, which goes beyond the real, must be realistically situated. Ellul’s sociology here is needed.

Ellul’s sociology owes much to Weber and certainly a great deal to Marx. Marx’s understanding that history is made by tensions arising in an enslaved and alienated manufacturing economy is granted but is considered too narrow (46–47, 63–65, 126–36). Marx hoped that labor, properly owned and shared, would liberate. He did not see the humiliation of labor by the power of technology to produce an all-encompassing mentality enthralled by the necessity of efficiency and the mathematics-like abstractions in and for which the other, Otherness, is denied. Technology as a mentality makes choices automatically that expand geometrically to become the only form of judgment allowed (88–94). “What can be done will be done,” is the pronouncement of monism, one of the seven characteristics of the technical phenomenon exuded by technique as it turns concepts into objects. Only technology can be god-like (142–50). A god outside the process is banished. “Is this process, or method, or object efficient?” are the only relevant questions. Efficiency, though absolute and god-like, can be defined only within the process or system of which it is a member and thus provide no real validation beyond feelings of alienation and ennui. The answer of no answer is: the next moment, which is endlessly streamed. The novelist can say their best work is their next novel, because it is their work in the struggle to enact standards that guide the process that is an other and an outside. The technician or the consumer can say only “whatever” and “what’s next,”

like the twenty-four-hour evening news. “What is the best memo?” is a question that makes sense only outside the system of communication like an office that drives it. “What is the best product?” is answered by: what sells or doesn’t sell but provides a tax write-off.

Technique produces a necessary ephemeral as it turns objects and natural processes into technical phenomena that are images or image-like. Their ability to refer is cancelled, as noted above. Stories on the evening news are taken as forever new (note the continual flashing sign—Breaking News), why they can be repeated without boring an audience that expects nothing more than what flashes before it. For many, milk and cream come in cartons and cans; meat is found in supermarkets. Fast food restaurants initially understood this clearly by greeting customers with pictures of the food they are to eat; the picture becomes the food. Thus, the state is tied to the ephemeral that propaganda unifies to a level previously unknown (98–113). Revolution becomes impossible; a mentality that would accomplish it now enables it (126–36). As Weber argued, the political is what controls force, and the current force is technique (119). An appeal to force and violence reinforces the technical mentality.

The human word, Ellul reminds, is like God’s word that reaches and refers to a beyond of meaning, to a space where human freedom in the encounter with various objectivities can manifest. God, through Christ, becomes an Other to himself. For a number of readers, Ellul’s notion of Christianity as a viable response to technique is problematic. Weber noted that in the disenchanted modern world, church doors are always open. But all of Ellul’s readers might agree that without an Other, freedom falters and fails. I take this to be the basis of Ellul’s dialectic, which is central to Van Vleet’s and Rollison’s study, taking us back to Ellul and his texts and to our current places in a technical world with or without the Other.

Review of *Introduction à Jacques Ellul*

David W. Gill

Chastenet, Patrick. *Introduction à Jacques Ellul*. Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 2019, 123 pp.

Since it was published in 1992, many of us have wished that Patrick Chastenet's *Lire Ellul: Introduction à l'œuvre socio-politique de Jacques Ellul*¹ would be translated and made available to English readers. It has never happened, but now twenty-seven years later we have an even better, updated, successor introduction from the world's leading expert on the thought of Jacques Ellul: *Introduction à Jacques Ellul*.

Patrick Chastenet was Jacques Ellul's assistant as a graduate student in the 1970s. Throughout his own years as a professor of political science (now at the University of Bordeaux, where Jacques Ellul spent his whole career), Chastenet has explored, critiqued, appropriated, and extended Ellul's perspectives. Chastenet's interviews of Ellul² remain the best, most comprehensive and insightful in the genre. Chastenet is the founding president, since 2000, of the Bordeaux-based Association internationale Jacques Ellul and is a founding board member, also in 2000, of the International Jacques Ellul Society. All of this is important background for a deep appreciation of the readiness of the author to deliver a rich, accurate, and helpful introduction to the complex and far-ranging thought of Jacques Ellul.

Chastenet begins with a chapter on Jacques Ellul's biography, dividing it into the formative years of 1912–45 and then the post-WWII period as a busy professor and writer, 1945–94. We are reminded of Ellul's debts to Kierkegaard, Marx, Barth, and the Bible, and of the formative influences of

the Great Depression, Personalism, the rise of fascism, the Resistance, and the Reformed Church of France.

Introduction à Jacques Ellul is organized around five topics, each of which gets a chapter: technique, propaganda, politics, revolution, and ecology. What is Ellul's thought in each of those areas? In his chapter on technique, Chastenet clarifies the basic definitions and issues and their development through Ellul's three big books on the topic. In our age of media chaos and claims of fake news, the chapter on propaganda has renewed relevance. So too the chapters on politics and revolution (and political change) helpfully clarify Ellul's contribution. The final chapter on ecology did not have an antecedent parallel in Chastenet's 1992 introduction, so this is a welcome addition in our time of climate devastation.

Throughout the introduction, the core concept of technique weaves through the various topics. Chastenet also brings in Ellul's theological insights as a counterpoint to the sociology, just as Ellul planned—though one could argue for an even greater attention to this half of Ellul's life work, to get the full picture. Chastenet skillfully brings a robust list of classic and contemporary thinkers (including several from the years since Ellul's death) into the discussion to show their similarities and differences with Ellul.

Introduction à Jacques Ellul is a compact little volume of 123 pages, but don't let that fool you. The font size is small, and there is little space between lines. Furthermore, Chastenet does not waste words. Every paragraph, every line, is carefully crafted to enlighten us about Ellul's thinking. Even veteran Ellul readers and scholars will enjoy and profit from this book. Newcomers to Ellul will be helped immensely. And let's push to get this book translated into English and other languages as soon as possible!

Notes

1. Presses universitaires de Bordeaux.
2. *Jacques Ellul on Politics, Technology, and Christianity: Conversations with Patrick Chastenet* [1994] (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005).

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About the International Jacques Ellul Society

The International Jacques Ellul Society, founded in 2000 by former students of Ellul, links scholars, students, and others who share an interest in the legacy of Jacques Ellul (1912–94), longtime professor at the University of Bordeaux. Along with promoting new publications related to Ellul and producing the *Ellul Forum*, the Society sponsors a biennial conference. IJES is the anglophone sister society of the francophone Association internationale Jacques Ellul.

The objectives of IJES are threefold:

Preserving a Heritage. The Society seeks to preserve and disseminate Ellul’s literary and intellectual heritage through republication, translation, and secondary writings.

Extending a Critique. Ellul is best known for his penetrating critique of *la technique*, of the character and impact of technology on our world. The Society seeks to extend his social critique particularly concerning technology.

Researching a Hope. Ellul was not only a social critic but also a theologian and activist in church and community. The Society seeks to extend his theological, biblical, and ethical research with its special emphases on hope and freedom.

IJES is a nonprofit organization, fully reliant on membership fees and donations from supporters worldwide. For more information or to become a member, please visit ellul.org.