The Ellul Forum

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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.

The Ellul Forum
Number 67 Spring 2021

3 **Guest Editors' Letter**

Articles

7 The Green Revolution Response to Modern Technology: The Catholic Worker Farms and Jacques Ellul
Paul V. Stock

19 Nothing Sacred: The Virtual Classroom in the Age of Zoom
John Paul Russo

29 Christians and the Perils of Technology: Helpful Insights from Neil Postman
Rick Clifton Moore

47 A Christian Approach to Technology
Richard Stivers

57 Concerning a Christian Response to Technology
J.M. van der Laan

67 **Book Reviews**

73 **About the Contributors**

Guest Editors' Letter

Richard Stivers and
J.M. van der Laan

The theme of this issue is a Christian response to late-modern technology. The preeminence of technology in all its expressions today is not something that Christians should, but too often do, take for granted. The pervasive presence of digital technology alone calls for examination and evaluation, not least by Christians. In his prophetic work *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, Jacques Ellul argues that the Church needs to rethink its position on technology in terms of abandonment/hope. He asserts that we live in a time, not unprecedented, in which we have abandoned God, and, because we have done so, he us. We are left to our own devices, notably technology. Technology undeniably offers or promises to provide us human beings with remedies for all our problems, cures for all our diseases, and solutions to all our woes. While accepting real technological benefits, Christians must refuse to hope in a technological salvation. Christian hope, a hope trusting in God's abiding love and desire to be present in our lives, must fill the void of God's abandonment of the Church and the world.

We need to clarify our starting position, rather than work out a detailed ethic, Ellul stated. In consequence, the following essays do not prescribe any specific course of action. They explore how Christians have responded and are to respond to technology, from various perspectives, sometimes as critique, sometimes as proposition. They vary in approach and theme, but they each address the question less in an academic than in an existential way; that is, they write with a view to how we properly live in and with technology. While they offer their own points of view, they also pose questions for readers to consider and weigh and find their own answers.

Rather than summarize the contents of each contribution, we describe them here only briefly so as to direct the reader to the authors' own words. In

the first piece, Paul Stock discusses how manual labor on Catholic Worker farms asserts a separation from the all-encompassing realm of computer systems. Conscious decisions to employ appropriate technology, even to limit involvement with technology, promote health for the community and the land. What is more, the farms offer Christians models for living in hope.

With the second essay, John Paul Russo addresses remote learning and the Zoom phenomenon as it emerged during the coronavirus pandemic. The virtuality of Zoom contrasts with the reality of face-to-face instruction; its disconnected connections allow only for absent presences. As he indicates, Zoom epitomizes the technological system, and as it parodies the Transcendent, it induces us to live without hope.

By comparing the work of Neil Postman with that of Ellul, Rick Clifton Moore yields insights about a uniquely Christian response to technology in his contribution. He inquires whether Christians consider the actual role of technology in our lives all that carefully, whether we can truly acknowledge the culturally corrosive effects of technology. Overwhelmed by technology, we too readily accept its confusion of means with ends. And as we fail to limit the overabundance of information produced by technology, we similarly fail to counteract false and misleading information.

Richard Stivers's article directs attention to the specifically spiritual problems technology creates for believers. With its manifold gifts and great appeal, it subtly fosters idolatry. Technology defines reality and asserts itself in place of God's truth and meaning. Above all, its power eliminates Christian freedom and threatens Christian hope.

Lastly, J.M. van der Laan calls for the Church to be in, but not of, the world, a world devoted to technology and to the false values and false meaning it offers. If the Church is to be a witness to that world, it cannot uncritically accept and adopt whatever technology becomes available, as it has so often done to date. Rather than follow the world, the Church must with Christian hope provide a light through the darkness of the technological system enfolding us.

While the essays in this issue do not necessarily offer explicit recommendations for Christians to adopt or enact, they challenge them to consider

whether they have thought carefully and critically about living according to the parameters of technology. Each author recognizes the autonomy of modern technology, acknowledges our need to free ourselves from its domination and imperatives, and points to hope, a hope born only of faith in God's boundless love, a hope asking for God's presence in our lives, as the antidote to a misplaced and mistaken trust in technology.

The Green Revolution Response to Modern Technology:
The Catholic Worker Farms and Jacques Ellul

Paul V. Stock

In 1983, Katherine Temple, in her role as one of the editors of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper of the New York City Catholic Worker house of hospitality, wrote an editorial concerning her ambivalence at the recent acquisition of a home computer because the addressograph machine was made obsolete.[1] “Secretly, I have felt a bond with the Luddites who wanted to smash the new machines in the 18th century.”[2] Temple, who had interviewed and written about Ellul for her dissertation, imbued the *Catholic Worker* newspaper (and thus the movement as a whole) with an overt Ellulian critique of technique, continuing a consistent skepticism of technology that had begun with Peter Maurin in the 1930s and his brand of French personalism that emphasized dignity and direct action.[3] Temple’s ambivalence over (what many thought “small potatoes”) the computer offered a glimpse at the everyday tension of working with and against technology at the same time. As Ellul argues in *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, “If one refers hope to the possible, then the computer is the true figure of hope. [...] It possesses all the eventualities. In a given situation nothing escapes the computer.”[4] Temple gives us a concrete contradiction from which to wrestle with the role of modern technology in our lives. Further, she argued, “Just as money—dollars and cents—cannot be divorced from capitalism, so this home computer or that little video game cannot be divorced from our enslavement to technology.”[5] Like her assessments about the computer, ag-

Stock, Paul V. “The Green Revolution Response to Modern Technology: The Catholic Worker Farms and Jacques Ellul.” *Ellul Forum* 67 (Spring 2021): 7–17. © Paul V. Stock, CC BY-NC-ND.

riculture in the twentieth century took on the mantra "There is no other way," such that horsepower, manual labor, and smaller-scale growing seem not just quaint but backwards and immoral.

The Catholic Worker movement, founded by journalist Dorothy Day and itinerant theologian Peter Maurin, emerged in the midst of the Great Depression to fill a vacuum between state-level responsiveness and individual charity. The early Worker ministered to striking seamen and those evicted, while documenting other social ills in the pages of the *Catholic Worker* newspaper. Within just a few years, the Catholic Worker expanded from a newspaper and sometime coffee and soup lines to providing housing and clothing. This Catholic-inspired movement often confounded both liberals and conservatives alike. While many observers may recognize the affinity between Ellul and the Catholic Worker movement's personalism, critiques of capitalism, and faith-filled witness, readers of the *Ellul Forum* may not be as familiar with the long tradition of Catholic Worker farms that exhibit hope despite the fact that "We are living in a situation which we think has no way out and is hopeless."[6] That hope comes in the form of a philosophy of work, consistent and ethical engagement with technology, and an emphasis on the dignity of persons through hospitality and communication.

My own journey to the Catholic Worker is through these farms. While writing about organic farmers in Illinois, I came across a mention (probably a footnote) about these Catholics concerned about the poor who also like to farm; maybe it was an offhand reference to Peter Maurin. I haven't seen it since and can't tell you where it was from. But it never let go, and I'm pretty sure I might be the only person to have learned about Dorothy Day because of the green revolution and not the reverse. But what is this green revolution? Isn't the green revolution where we sent seeds, pesticides, artificial fertilizers, and irrigation materials, along with the credit-financing systems, to India, ostensibly to grow more food but which actually impoverished Indian farmers? Yes, and, in fact, it represents technique at its most insidious. And yet, Peter Maurin named his idea for a socio-theological revamp "the green revolution" to counter the Communist "red revolution" gripping the globe in the 1920s and 1930s (more on this below).

When I attended the 2013 National Catholic Workers Farm Gathering, people would ask, What farm are you from? None. Where do live? Lawrence, Kansas (where there is not a Catholic Worker farm). And then the confusion sets in. I'm a professor at the University of Kansas that studies the Catholic Worker and sustainable farmers internationally. When deciding to do my PhD but after volunteering and living in community in Selma, Alabama for a year, I tried to discern a project that combined my intellectual curiosity with my own faith journey.[7] In the Catholic Worker farms, I found not only an important intellectual topic but one that offers daily challenges to my own wrestling with technology and faith.

The Catholic Worker's Green Revolution

Chris Montesano, one of the co-founders of the Sheep Ranch Catholic Worker Farm in the 1970s, described the day he went to begin building his home, with a hammer in one hand and a book in the other. At that very moment and without Chris having any knowledge of how to build a house, a man stopped his pickup in the road and asked, "What are you building?"

> "A house."
>
> "Mind if I help? I've been looking for a project, and I'm a builder."[8]

The serendipitous meeting changed both men's lives. These journeys in the green revolution involve such serendipity—or maybe the work of angels.

When Dorothy Day met Peter Maurin, observers would have been hard-pressed to anticipate that a movement that would last for at least eighty-seven years was about to begin. And those that purported to know Dorothy would also be hard-pressed to predict that rural communes or farms would become a major proposed solution to the social ills of capitalism. Dorothy was a journalist by training and a burgeoning activist as well as a recent convert to Catholicism in 1933. Peter, born a peasant in France, flirted with theological and philosophical circles in Paris before emigrating to Canada and then floating through the US before settling in New York City. Within three years of meeting one another, the Catholic Worker published an eponymous newspaper, ran houses of hospitality in multiple cities, and began searching for a farm. These three points of the green revolution

(again, as opposed to a red one)—of clarification of thought (newspapers, public lectures, teach-ins, conversation, prayer), hospitality (coffee, soup, vegetables, donated food, vegan lifestyles), and communes or farms (for food provisioning, restoration, retreat)—compose over eighty-seven years of Catholic Worker tradition that exhibit a long history of ambivalence and contradiction regarding technology.[9]

The *Catholic Worker* newspaper printed out of the New York house could be considered, like the *New York Times*, the paper of record. While not officially the mouthpiece of all the houses, farms, and those involved, it is often an expression of both the tradition and the contemporary challenges of those involved in the Catholic Worker movement. To that end the *Catholic Worker* publishes the movement's Aims and Means every May, celebrating the May 1 anniversary of the publication of the first issue. The 2020 issue declares as one of the movement's means:

> A "green revolution," so that it is possible to rediscover the proper meaning of our labor and our true bonds with the land; a distributist communitarianism, self-sufficient through farming, crafting and appropriate technology; a radically new society, where people will rely on the fruits of their own toil and labor; associations of mutuality, and a sense of fairness to resolve conflicts.[10]

Thus Catholic Workers are explicit about their stance toward technology, emphasizing the writings of Ellul but also those of Ivan Illich, Paul Goodman, Helen and Scott Nearing, and Peter Kropotkin, among others, whose words were quoted throughout the newspaper but also in the newsletters, zines, pamphlets, and speeches of Catholic Workers since the 1930s.

Peter Maurin, for his part, while never leaving the kind of written corpus that we often associate with significant thinkers, favored conversation and interpersonal interaction to impart an emphasis on work and labor that drew from medieval guilds and peasant-village models of societal organization. Catholic Worker–aligned priest Fr. Clarence Duffy interpreted Peter's vision thus:

> The object of the project is to build up healthy human beings on healthy soil and with healthy food and to make as many of them as possible, free men and free women who can live as God intended

> them, and as they desire to live in a world of peace and reasonable abundance on their way to eternity.[11]

From the inception of what we might call the first Catholic Worker farm in 1936 in Easton, Pennsylvania, farms have played a significant, if not large, part of the movement. By 1940, there were upwards of twelve farms. The US entrance into World War II and the pacifist stance taken by Dorothy Day (and many Catholic Workers) created a rift and diminishment of the movement. The split between conscientious objectors and peace activists versus pragmatists and anti-fascists cleaved the movement for decades. It took the emergence of the anti-war left and the back-to-the-landers of the 1960s to fully restore the Catholic Worker to its previous popularity.

Multiple farms established soon after the movement's founding, though, offered good examples of what the farms could look like within the movement. Two farms named St. Benedict emerged early in the farm experiments, one in Michigan by the Murphy family, and the other in Upton, Massachusetts. At Upton, the farm merged three families, with some remaining on the land through the 1990s. The Gauchat couple led a push to establish a farm outside Cleveland that today, while not a Catholic Worker farm, still serves those differently abled. Other efforts sprouted and wilted over the decades, sharing consistent goals of limiting technological involvement, local interest as paramount, and with different goals related to hospitality and husbandry.[12]

Prominent peace activists who moved to rural Catholic Worker houses offer an example of the dynamism of the green revolution. Brian Terrell and Betsy Keenan moved to Maloy, Iowa, with an emphasis on local food production and rural advocacy as well as engaged peace work against nuclear weapons and other injustices. Their newsletter, *The Sower*, often details Chris's latest imprisonment for one of these actions.

Tom Cornell, famous for his involvement in burning draft documents during the anti-Vietnam movement, and his family moved to the most recent iteration of a Catholic Worker farm affiliated with the New York City house of hospitality in 1979. At Peter Maurin Farm, Tom and his wife Monica and son Tommy, Jr. host those in need of hospitality while also actively farming the land.

***

Early on in the Easton Catholic Worker Farm, three men tried to plant peas. One held a book, another a ruler, and the third a bag of seeds. John Filligar approached with a sense of disbelief and asked, "What are you doing?"

> "Planting seeds. The book says they are supposed to be an inch apart."
>
> Filligar grabbed the seeds from the young men and proceeded to finish the planting.[13]

This anecdote speaks to the divide between the scholar and the worker that Maurin so loathed when it comes to the land. In my scholarship of the Catholic Worker, I might as well have been one of the early Catholic Workers trying to farm out of a book just as Chris Montesano tried to build a house—a little out of my depth. Here I sit in my university/home office without an ounce of agrarian experience, and yet, as many have identified, the land, the rural, and the people connected to both are a vital fount for community, as well as socio-ecological health and well-being. As a pair of geographers writing under the pen name J.K. Gibson-Graham argue,

> Our interest in building new worlds involves making credible those diverse practices that satisfy needs, regulate consumption, generate surplus, and maintain and expand the commons, so that community economies in which interdependence between people and environments is ethically negotiated can be recognized now and constructed in the future.[14]

For Gibson-Graham, the Catholic Worker farms would be an example of diverse economies, both persisting within and also resisting consumerism and capitalism.

But they are also trying to farm. And farm well. As Sirach 7:15 says, "Hate not laborious tasks, nor farming, which was ordained by the Most High." Just as each Worker has their own journey of discernment, serendipity, community, conflict, and resignation, so too do the movement's farms as a whole. As the editors wrote under a banner labelled "The Land—There is no unemployment on the Land":

> We have never held that life on the land is a Utopia. Our fellow workers on the farm are confronted by endless work, lack of tools,

> seed, lack of variety and stimulus in their daily work. They are indeed leading a hard life and a poor life. But they are trying to rebuild within the shell of the old, a new society, wherein the dignity and freedom and responsibility of man is emphasized. And there is no place better to do it than on the land.[15]

The Re-Emergence of the Catholic Worker Farm in the Driftless Region

Not only do the farms continue to exist, they may just be fulfilling McKanan's assessment that, "Though the Catholic Worker has in recent decades been more associated with issues of war and homelessness, the decentralized economics of Peter Maurin's green revolution provide one of the most promising solutions to global warming."[16] The farms are also growing in number and stability. The growth in numbers of new communities and the increasing number of Catholic Worker farmers led to a new annual gathering of the farms that—while they discuss typical Catholic Worker conversations such as Peter's historical role in the movement, women in the Church, Dorothy Day and sainthood, and the decay of civilization, among others—also discuss the politics of seed catalogs and manure. Talk about shitty theology. One of the more promising areas of growth is the emergence of multiple Catholic Worker farms in the Driftless bioregion in the upper Midwest of the United States. The Catholic Workers of New Hope (Dubuque, Iowa), Lake City, Minnesota, Anathoth (Luck, Wisconsin), and St. Isidore (Cuba City, Wisconsin) farms embody a new energy for the collective greening of the movement.[17] While they all maintain significant food-growing efforts, they also minister to the poor and work for Indigenous and environmental justice. The Greenhorns, themselves an activist organization that celebrates growing food as part of a peaceful future, documents some of the Catholic Worker efforts in a video with an emphasis on intergenerational sharing.[18]

As Eric Anglada describes it in volume 3 of *The Isidorian*, the handmade zine published by the Workers on the farm, "The uneven landscape of the Driftless [bioregion] contains myriad springs, sinkholes, massive Oaks, and bluffs containing spectacular views of the Great River."[19] Anglada describes his life as a home-comer, following E.F. Schumacher, in the following terms:

> Much of the work with which I engage is the quotidian work of supporting the home: splitting firewood with an ax, gardening with hand-tools, tending chickens and cows, hanging laundry, cooking over wood, and cleaning the almost endless mountain of dishes a kitchen full of home-grown ingredients inevitably produces. These satisfying labors are the ways I can join my body with my ethics.[20]

That ethical work includes these skill-based jobs as well as community engagement through a new Community Supported Agriculture scheme and hospitality. In addition to farm work split between the two families and rotating cast of interns and temporary residents, St. Isidore Catholic Worker farm prioritizes peacemaking work in conjunction with other Workers and a local Catholic university, cooperation with a local group of Catholic sisters, anti-racist and decolonizing work with local tribes and guests, and peace and non-violent resistance. Brenna Anglada, specifically, took part in an action called the Four Necessity Valve Turners, in which they entered the property of a pipeline shut-off valve to protest the company's and government's infringement on tribal, sacred lands as well as to bring to light the urgency of climate change.[21] In mid-2020, felony charges were dropped. As Anglada describes the Driftless Region and their work there, "People here, more than anywhere else I've ever lived, are extracting themselves bit by bit from the extractive economy."[22]

Conclusions

If we return to Temple's dilemma with the computer, she asked, "Is it possible to propagate the dignity of manual labor if the only means available is a computer?"[23] She offered, "We are constantly caught between pure means and necessities, and it is hard to know where the point of assimilation comes. As Peter also said, 'At least it arouses the conscience.'"[24] And so do these Catholic Workers that continue to build the green revolution with hopes of arousing consciences as witnesses for us to see and be challenged by. Through their lives they prove that the trappings of computers, technique, and capitalism are fictions unnecessary to live a fulfilling, loving life, whether Christian or not. As Jeff Dietrich wrote in the *Ellul Forum*, "As Christian realists, we must be engaged with a sinful world, but aware that it is not possible to do anything about it."[25]

The focus on community, reconciliation, and love, inspired by Christ and the saints, offers Catholic Worker farms daily opportunities to engage in love without much hope of change. And yet that is the hope. Tom Cornell, Jr., during a talk at the 2013 National Gathering, reflected on the culture of the house that recognizes the tension between visions of grandeur about reshaping the system and the reality of the little way of potatoes, onions, and carrots. Either way, we are called to do the work well. In the wider community, the presence of the Worker farms is a witness—witness not only in solidarity with the poor, but to those ignorant of living otherwise than they do.[26]

The Catholic Workers, especially the farmers, are an example of living incognito, where "[the incognito] is a matter of remaining the firm and constant bearer of a truth which is no longer uttered."[27] By doing so, they actively help to keep open a crack of hope and possibility.[28] Through their faith-informed stance toward and with technology, the movement aims to fulfill the relationship to technology along Ellulian lines where "to give to things, to nature and to technology, a specific value, considered in relation to God and not in relation to man, is to treat them with respect, and caution."[29] The difficult and often contradictory stance of being in the world but actively hoping for another continues to confound observers. As one anarchist author commented about the Catholic Worker as a whole, "If it did not exist I would have thought it impossible."[30]

But it does exist. So do the farmers at St. Isidore Catholic Worker farm in Cuba City, Wisconsin. And so do the other farms in the Driftless Region. And so do the other farms and houses of hospitality of the Catholic Worker. And so do people like myself and the readers and contributors to the *Ellul Forum*. The Catholic Worker farms offer witness to ways of living with and in spite of technology that show us ways to live in the world that foster hope, dignity, and love.

Notes

1. Parts of this essay are based on Paul V. Stock, *The Original Green Revolution: The Catholic Worker Farms and Environmental Morality* (Fort Collins, CO: Colorado State University, 2009) as well as observations during the 2013 National Catholic

Worker Gathering (February 15–18) in Dubuque, Iowa, and visits and correspondence with New Hope CW Farm and St. Joseph's Catholic Worker Farm in Kaikohe, Aotearoa New Zealand.

2. Katherine Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma." *The Catholic Worker* (December 1983), 1.
3. Temple herself drew a comparison between Maurin and Ellul (despite their many differences): "Each has turned against the tide to develop critical analyses that move us beyond ideologies and state power; each is rooted in a Christianity that pre-dates confidence in 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness'; each has understood the Christian response as one of personalism, self-sacrifice, poverty, the daily works of mercy; each is a Christian intellectual in the true sense." Katherine Temple, "Jacques Ellul: A Catholic Worker Vision of Culture." *Ellul Forum* 7 (July 1991), 6.
4. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 196n.
5. Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma," 7.
6. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 192.
7. Stock, *The Original Green Revolution*.
8. Chris Montesano, "Panel Discussion of Catholic Worker Farms." National Catholic Workers Farm Gathering, Dubuque, Iowa, February 15–18, 2013.
9. Paul V. Stock, "The Perennial Nature of the Catholic Worker Farms: A Reconsideration of Failure." *Rural Sociology* 79.2 (2014): 143–73. https://doi.org/10.1111/ruso.12029.
10. "Aims and Means," *The Catholic Worker* (May 2020), 3.
11. Fr. Clarence Duffy, "Food, Farming, and Freedom." *The Catholic Worker* (October 1952), 3.
12. For a take on the perennial-ness of the farms see Stock, "The Perennial Nature of the Catholic Worker Farms."
13. Peggy Scherer, "John the Farmer." *The Catholic Worker* (June–July 1982), 3.
14. J.K. Gibson-Graham, "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for Other Worlds." *Progress in Human Geography* 32.5 (2008), 623. https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508090821.
15. "Farming Commune." *The Catholic Worker* (October 1939), 8.

16. Dan McKanan, *The Catholic Worker after Dorothy: Practicing the Works of Mercy in a New Generation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 221.
17. Paul V. Stock and Lukas Szrot, "Justice." In *Routledge Handbook of Sustainable and Regenerative Food Systems*, ed. Jessica Duncan, Michael Carolan, and Johannes S.C. Wiserke, 98–112 (New York: Routledge, 2021), 106.
18. Available at https://vimeo.com/204248108.
19. Eric Anglada, "Homecoming." *The Isidorian* 3 (2019), 13.
20. Eric Anglada, "Homecoming," 14.
21. Brenna Anglada, "Pipeline Resistance: Four Necessity Valve Turners." *The Isidorian* 3 (2019): 6.
22. Eric Anglada, "Homecoming," 14.
23. Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma," 7.
24. Temple, "Our Computer Dilemma," 7.
25. Jeff Dietrich, "Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker of the Next Century—Therefore Choose Life." *Ellul Forum* 7 (July 1991), 6.
26. Stock and Szrot, "Justice," 106.
27. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 293.
28. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 249.
29. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 237.
30. David DeLeon, *The American as Anarchist* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 65.

Nothing Sacred:
The Virtual Classroom in the Age of Zoom

John Paul Russo

In "Locksley Hall" (1840), Alfred, Lord Tennyson heralded the future of Victorian society in the rhetoric of the technological sublime: "Not in vain the distance beacons. Forward, forward let us range. / Let the great world spin for ever down the ringing grooves of change."[1] Tennyson would do the same for evolution, for he was quintessentially a poet in tune with his age. Yet evolution had its dark side, an overwhelming determinism, in which both individual and type were swallowed up by the oceans of time. With industrialism, people had their hands on the levers, or so it may have seemed in 1840 when the ringing grooves of rail tracks and the sound of train whistles were becoming the epitome of the nineteenth-century Western economy. However, toward the end of his career, reacting to the continued, grinding poverty in the cities and the enormous disillusionment with Victorian optimism, he recanted in "Locksley Hall Tis Sixty Years After." Its message was: "Let us hush this cry of 'Forward.'"[2]

With the mass application of technology to the classroom in 2020, I am one to urge, "Let us hush this cry of 'Forward.'" It was inevitable that when nature wreaked havoc by the first major pandemic in a century, people would fight back with their greatest technological weapons, on the medical front, in consumer rearrangements, in pedagogical innovation. One should not let slip this opportunity to assess the impact and quality of the online classroom, at least an aspect of it: the videoconferencing platform Zoom. No feature of academic life under the pandemic is more iconic than Zoom, either for classes, one-on-one tutorials and advising, or administrative meetings. Even after vaccines become available, the stimulus that has been given to online learning will have long-term effects.

Russo, John Paul. "Nothing Sacred: The Virtual Classroom in the Age of Zoom." *Ellul Forum* 67 (Spring 2021): 19–27. © John Paul Russo, CC BY-NC-ND.

Among the recent arrivals in social media, Zoom was founded in 2011, launched in 2013, and had ten million daily meeting participants by the end of December 2019. The number rose to two hundred million a day in the first three months of 2020; to three hundred million a day by April 30. The second quarter of 2020 saw $663.5 million in revenue, a jump of $517.7 million from the previous year; the stock rose sixfold in the period from January to November. At that time, with the announcement of a vaccine, Zoom shares declined.[3]

It is early evening, 6:00 p.m.; our seminar is about to open. Admittedly, the in-between hour is not propitious. Normally we have supper in the first twenty minutes of class and the discussion picks up from there. Now, instead of welcoming the students in person, I observe their faces, each framed in a square, as they appear at random on screen over a period of five minutes. These squares constantly reassemble themselves as students enter and fill a square, changing the make-up of the screen like figures on a game board (I am reminded of the television game show Hollywood Squares). It lends an edgy if not frenetic quality to what had otherwise been a pleasant face-to-face gathering. Some say hello, others wave, most just sit and stare at the screen, which partly means looking at themselves in a mirror, as they wait for the class to begin.

They arrive from as many as half a dozen time zones, from East Asia, Europe, and the Caribbean; from Florida, California, and Chicago. Their settings differ widely; unequal access remains a problem. Some students sign in from home, where family members may cross behind them; some show up in a mask, since they had gone outside to leave the room free for a roommate to study. Others seem distracted, looking at their screen and checking their cellphone, picking up a coffee, petting the dog in their lap, or muting themselves, closing the screen, and leaving the room. You see on their faces that they tune in and out more easily without the live presence of a classroom. The quality of sound and connectivity varies from square to square; the images are from sharp to blurred, well to poorly lit. All this is a far cry from a class of students in the same room around a large oval table.

Once their number is near complete, I address them as a group with the aim of bringing a degree of unified attention. So much of the seminar's suc-

cess depends on how well one overcomes the centrifugal forces of distance, disconnections, glitches, and burnout. Meanwhile, someone has asked a question about a deadline: I try to find the person; the voice is coming from a central speaker, not from her square, and, as sound and image are disassociated by the medium, I find her by the lime-green neon border lighted around her square. All this searching takes long enough to upset the natural process of communication, and after two or three such searches, I am losing the collective attention of the class even before it has been solidly established. All through the seminar, moments like this one occur—what one commentator calls the "halting conversations in Zoom." The time required to locate and identify the speaker disrupts normal conversation. Moreover, Zoom is non-dialectical; it is rare for any kind of class discussion to take off over an extended period, on account of the difficulty of "breaking in" because there is no "talking over" someone. One's ability to mute and unmute oneself only increases this power of eloignment. Zoom disallows or at least reduces the possibility of the kind of discussion that the give-and-take of a seminar requires. Besides, even where one can see the student's face online, eye-to-eye contact is not possible. The squares make the eye too small and blurred for eye contact; something in the medium resists the eye's reflected glint in communication; and Shakespeare's "most pure spirit of sense"[4] eludes capture.

In some classes, I am told, students show up for attendance in the first five minutes, then turn off their video and mute themselves; their name remaining on the square marks their attendance. Are they still present? Perhaps they have just crawled out of bed and want to participate without being on screen. If one suspects the student is absent, the only way to know is by calling the name and asking a question. Anecdotally, a history instructor at a community college said that often he calls in vain. (To counter such absenteeism, some instructors refuse to record the class; that, however, punishes the good students.) One solution was to let students decide at the outset whether to choose to attend online or in-person. The vast majority of his twenty students chose in-person. Within weeks, the numbers dwindled, as students slipped away on the path of least resistance to online learning. Only two students on the face-to-face track remained at term's end. Yet at

the beginning of the following term, the majority again chose the in-person option.

The seminar winds up just after 8:00 p.m. Instead of being energized, most of us are unduly fatigued. Some of this discomfort is surely owed to the daily trial of the pandemic. Yet the stress of the technological apparatus has also taken its toll, wrenching us to adjust to its technological rhythms as opposed to our own human rhythms—greeting, private conversation, aside, counter-argument. Worst of all, some class time is wasted on managing the system itself. Though this is likely to go down with time, for now what was supposed to be a means of overcoming difficulties and making matters easier has become an implacable kraken that provokes anxiety, frustration, and less than ideal conditions for learning. In a way, this is nothing new. Academic institutions adopt new platforms on a monthly basis, and faculty complain all too frequently of getting locked out, frozen, and on a help line.

In the past, when a class broke up, students left in small groups, some to continue the conversation by themselves, others to attend a club meeting or a sporting event. Now people mostly remain where they are: home alone, sitting outside at a café with wi-fi, in a dorm room. All I observe is their disappearance, one square at a time. Like phantoms in some modern underworld, they flicker for a time on the screen and then vanish.

In *The Technological Society* Ellul examines the five major characteristics of the technological system.[5] In my tally, Zoom exhibits each of them. *Efficiency*, the "supreme imperative and prime characteristic of technique," allowed it to seize the field and subdue its competitors. Relative ease of installation and operation was the "one best means" or "least effort" available, and so Zoom imposed itself with lightning speed. Its visuality is completely in keeping with technological principles: "technique requires visually oriented people. And people living in a technical milieu require that everything be visualized."[6] Second, through its power of *Self-Augmentation* it scaled up quickly and made ever-improved models of itself; its progression was geometric, not arithmetic. A week does not pass but I notice I am approving updated versions of Zoom, as if there were a choice. During the lockdown, when everything else was held back, it seemed as if nothing could stop its growth. Third, *Monism* means that it works the same everywhere, applies

everywhere; Zoom connects with computer programs, wi-fi, locations anywhere on the globe. It can be on a large screen in a lecture hall or shrink to the size of a cellphone. One can take exams on Zoom, with its vigilant camera to guard against cheating. Monism entails linkage: "each technological element is adapted to the technological system, and it is in respect to this system that the element has its true functionality, far more so than in respect to a human need or a social order."[7] Techniques of the classroom (screen sharing, grading) combine with techniques of administration, and advertising. Fourth, the technique of Zoom implies *Universalism*: it grows on all sides, across the planet, and everyone wants it and more and more of it: "as people attain a certain technological level, the same needs appear—spontaneously, it seems—beyond any distinctions of nation or social category"; "social class is no longer the explicative factor of cultural behavior."[8]

Fifth, Zoom exhibits *Autonomy* because it acts as a law unto itself, "depends only upon itself" and "maps its own route."[9] Did we have much of a choice in March 2020? We had only time to pay the bills. "The system continues to develop"; "the person [...] lives as though there is nothing he can do about it, as though he has no hope of arriving at the centers of decision." The sense of loss of control can be overwhelming: "[the person's] future is more precisely inscribed in the structures than it is in the stars."[10] This is by far the most serious consequence of the technological system: "the individual is reduced to the level of a catalyst."[11]

Corporate names are not lightly chosen; leaf through the online brochure of the successful Brand Institute, founded in 1993. There are always attempts to render technology friendlier or less imposing than it really is. Zoom is a popular comic book character, a comic film (2006), a comic signifier, but also a supersonic speed (mach 6 to mach 8). There are Zoom "chat rooms," for what could be less serious than "chat," a form of chatter, which also demeans its subject matter; or the "breakout" room, which sounds like kindergarten, but also the "prison" of the very program one uses. Ellul calls attention to infantilizing adjectives in advertising, which he calls putting flowers on an automobile engine.[12]

The word *zoom* was no freak accident; it enshrines speed, efficiency, novelty. As a definition, "to move quickly closer to an object" does not quite do the

job, because the speed might be of a breakneck order, and its power threatens violence. Zooming is controlled or focused energy, such as the zoom camera (invented in 1936), which can suddenly and unnaturally collapse the distance between the viewer and the object. It has the quality of being an invented, contextless word for the new, ahistorical, technological society; it first appeared as an echoic coinage in the late nineteenth century, which, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch writes in *The Railway Journey*, was an age highly conscious of speed and schedules.[13] Like *Kodak*, with the crisp, clicking sound of a snapshot (invented by George Eastman to be without a history, in an anagram game); or like *Google*, with its goofy playfulness (it was suggested by the founder's nine-year-old daughter), *zoom* is short, memorable, and onomatopoetic. The double *oo* sound in English is a sign of eeriness or weirdness (like g*oo*fy G*oo*gle): an owl *hooting* at night ("deep" -*oo* sounds) beneath the *moon*; also, *zoom* rhymes with danger words such as *gloom*, *loom*, *boom*, *doom*, *tomb*, and the near-rhyme *bomb*. As a floating signifier, the Zoom label contains its own propaganda.

Richard Wilbur employs the -*oom* sound ten times in the forty-four lines of his meditative landscape poem "In a Churchyard," which revisits Thomas Gray's "Elegy in a Country Churchyard." In Wilbur, -*oom* conveys a church bell's tolling, the moment of summons from one state of being to another:

> As when a ferry for the shore of death
> Glides looming toward the dock,
> Her engines cut, her spirits bating breath
> As the ranked pilings narrow toward the shock[14]

In the myths, crossing a wide body of water, one disembarks on the isle of the dead. "Bating breath" means "holding one's breath," as in a state of extreme angst, the prelude to the final exhalation. The "shock" symbolizes the soul's arrival, and also the moment when "the darker dead" like Wilbur's narrator and readers intimate as much as they can of the unknowability of death from an existential standpoint. The final letter of the alphabet, the *z* in *zoom* emphasizes an inherent property of the word, energy directed toward an endgame, towards finality or ultimacy, i.e., death. All of which brings us to the brink of the religious dimension of the technological system and one of its astonishing avatars named Zoom.

In an age abandoned by God, interpreted by Ellul to mean an age that has abandoned God, substitutes and secret sharers for the sacred power lie near at hand. Tocqueville first identified substitutes in universalizing political ideologies during the French Revolution.[15] Ellul points to the technological system that is grinding the world together and treating ideologies like so much fodder.[16] For all its materiality and amorality, the system mimics qualities of the Transcendent, to borrow the language of Rudolf Otto, qualities of overpoweringness, omnipresence, and *mysterium tremendum*. Otto explored the ineffability of transcendence whose ambient numinousness enables one to grasp by other means what cannot otherwise be conceptualized rationally. The ambiguity of the Transcendent invests the technological system; it engenders both the sublime, lovingkindness, and self-empowerment, but also "numinous horror" and "a personal nothingness and abasement before the awe-inspiring object" or "Wholly Other."[17] Like the divine, it penetrates everywhere, holding the power of life and death over us. It extends life expectancy, as with its "miracle" drugs; yet it pollutes the air we breathe and the food we eat, cutting down on life expectancy, not to mention its instruments of mass destruction. The technological system excites fascination and terror by its products, like the Transcendent which can create presence in absence, for example, in dangerous places such as deserts and high mountains; and the Transcendent "has wild and demonic forms and can sink to an almost grisly horror and shuddering," as in acts of violence and in technologically up-to-date horror films with robots and fierce animals such as lions and crocodiles (Leviathan), dinosaurs and dragons: "'the monstrous' is just the 'mysterious' in gross form."[18] The numinous can be immanent through parody and allusion, as in the giant Sphinx at the Luxor Resort in Las Vegas or the golden Lion at the old MGM Grand, whose mouth is the main portal that "consumes" its consumers. Would not Zoom make a good name for a casino? Think of what advertisers could do with it.

In all these ways, Zoom epitomizes the technological system and parodies the Transcendent. Ellul mentions YHWH's "empty, arbitrary sound, having no reference to any meaning (there is no acceptable etymology for YHWH)."[19] The same can be said of the word *zoom*, though it points to the stars.

A college student sits alone awaiting an online class, imagining what will happen. An hour of a teacher talking and an occasional question thrown out, almost mechanically, for discussion? The real danger of the virtual Zoom classroom is that it makes online learning more possible, more plausible, and more "cost effective." Face-to-machine contact again replaces face-to-face contact. The diminished interplay of the teacher and class in open-ended discussion constitutes a serious loss to learning, which should be taken into account and can be measured against the gains that online platforms offer. It may remind us that we no longer live within the realm of nature but within a technological bubble that thickens with each passing year.

Notes

1. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Locksley Hall" [1840], in *The Poems of Tennyson*, ed. Christopher Ricks (New York: Norton, 1972), 699.
2. Tennyson, "Locksley Hall," 1362.
3. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoom_Video_Communications.
4. Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida* III.3.112.
5. See John Paul Russo, *The Future Without a Past: The Humanities in a Technological Society* (Missoula: University of Missouri Press, 2005), 27–28.
6. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Main Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 151. For "least effort," see Russo, *Future Without a Past*, 252. Ellul employs the French *technique* rather than *technologie* to emphasize his focus on the system as a whole as opposed to this or that specific technology; *la technique* is the entire organized and interdependent ensemble dictating the technicization of everyday life. His translators have followed suit.
7. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 126. "Technique never observes the distinction between moral and immoral use. It tends, on the contrary, to create a completely independent technical morality." Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964), 97.
8. Ellul, *The Technological System*, 171. "The technical phenomenon shapes the total way of life."
9. Ellul, *The Technological System*, 125.

10. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1972), 7.
11. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 92–93, 135. “Inside the technical circle, the choice among methods, mechanism, organizations, and formulas is carried out automatically” (82).
12. Ellul, *The Technological System*, 47.
13. See Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1986), 29, 42–43.
14. Richard Wilbur, “In a Churchyard,” in *New and Collected Poems* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 127. The poem was first published in *Walking to Sleep* (1969).
15. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *The Ancien Régime and the Revolution*, trans. Gerald Bevan (London: Penguin, 2008), 21–25, 150–59 (I.2; III.3).
16. The Jansenist theme in Ellul recalls the Port-Royal era and Pascal. Cf. Lucien Goldmann, *The Hidden God: A Study of Tragic Vision in the Pensées of Pascal and the Tragedies of Racine* (New York: Humanities Press, 1964).
17. Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), 13, 18–19.
18. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 13, 82.
19. Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, 108.

Christians and the Perils of Technology:
Helpful Insights from Neil Postman

Rick Clifton Moore

Scandalous though it might be to admit in this journal, I sometimes wonder if the writings of Jacques Ellul are the best place for people to begin serious consideration of the role of technology in their lives. Granted, the French scholar was a brilliant cultural critic with keen insights into the twentieth-century milieu. Even so, his analysis is often quite profound. Many readers may thus find his ideas difficult to grasp. For Christians, as a subset of those readers, there are additional issues. Roman Catholics might find Ellul's rejection of natural law to be a non-starter. Some evangelicals might be greatly offended by Ellul's affinity for Marxism. Finally, believers of various Christian theological stripes might simply find the author's existentialist outlook to seem, well, a bit too French.

My experience working with students has led me to believe that a simpler introduction to key issues raised by Ellul can be found in the work of Neil Postman, a US scholar who had a gift for making difficult ideas both interesting and accessible. Postman is probably best known for *Amusing Ourselves to Death*,[1] a book that won an Orwell Award, an annual prize whose full title suggests that it recognizes contributions to "honesty and clarity in public language."[2] In that work, he began a scholarly analysis of technology that raised questions any college graduate could understand, and should be asking.

Seven years after publishing *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman provided another bold insight into technology, moving beyond the specifics of television, and even beyond communication technologies. *Technopoly* broadened

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Postman's analysis to more general "technological change."[3] Interestingly, there he paid homage to Jacques Ellul, briefly acknowledging that the French thinker (and others) had previously addressed many of his subjects. Seven years later, Postman penned[4] *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, a publication nominally about the Enlightenment but more broadly about "the realities of vast change, especially technological change."[5]

Within the three books just mentioned, Postman laid out a critique that can be thought-provoking for any who have not carefully considered the role of technology in their lives. In my view, he asked questions that all should be asking today.

In the space I have here, I want to highlight some of those important questions. Even so, as my task is to help us consider how Christians (specifically) should contemplate their relation to technology, I wish to recognize how Postman does not take his critique far enough.

"Technopoly" and the Question of "What Is Technology for?"

As noted above, Postman's most abstract analysis is provided in *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. In that work he argues that civilization has passed through two periods and is now entrenched in a third. The first he labels "tool-using culture." In that epoch, humans recognized the benefits of technology but placed cultural barriers around it. By no means was technology autonomous; rather it was "subject to the jurisdiction of some binding social or religious system."[6] At a key juncture of history, though, people became so enamored of their machines that they slowly began to remove the cultural barriers that I previously mentioned. In this domain of "technocracy," society shifted and became only "loosely controlled by social custom and religious tradition."[7] There developed a constant motivation to invent and an incessant desire to reap the benefits of any invention available. Postman posits, however, that in technocracy the residue of well-established social systems is strong enough to postpone the complete surrender of culture to technology. Not so in Technopoly,[8] which Postman sees as the third era and the one that citizens in most Western democracies

now experience. As the portmanteau suggests, in Technopoly technology becomes monopolistic. All other cultural elements must submit to it.

In all three books discussed here, Postman explains the repercussions of the shift to the third period of human experience. There is much in his analysis for Christians to seriously consider. The problems of a technopolistic society are manifold, and from a biblical perspective many of them are troubling and worthy of serious discernment.

As an example, though Postman does not necessarily exhibit a clear sense of Christian anthropology, he seems aware that humans have a profound ability to manipulate their social environment, and he argues that they should always do so with caution. Technological change, unfortunately, often entails unintended consequences. In fact, Postman suggests that the consequences are sometimes "ecological." The introduction of new technologies is such that the resulting world is often more than the old world plus the new technology. The resulting world soon becomes a radically different place. To provide a mundane example, when we think about the introduction of the automobile as technology, we often tell ourselves that our cities have merely become "cities plus automobiles." This, according to Postman, ignores the fact that the automobile drastically changed the space that we previously used the word "cities" to describe.[9] This change might seem inconsequential to the Christian faith, but when we realize that the Church is always embedded in real communities, thinking of the physical nature of those communities becomes important. We do well to consider how our technological choices alter our communities.

Unfortunately, the nature of society, and the nature of technology in our present time, is such that we rarely have time to ask such questions. The societal aspect of this reflects an unwillingness to doubt the goodness of technology. The technological aspect reflects the hyper speed at which we produce and disseminate new devices, a pace that transforms our lack of willingness into a lack of ability. Certainly Christians should, at the very least, attempt to better understand these aspects of their lived experience. Postman provides good introductory thoughts on both.

In *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, Postman describes how those with great trust in technology wield a "giddy and aggressive optimism."[10] They

sincerely believe that people will make good choices and (predominantly) use technology wisely. They never stop to ask how or why any particular technology might be valuable in the first place. Often, in fact, their answers to questions are quite circular. A section in *Technopoly* alludes to the constant quest to obtain information more quickly, providing details from Postman's frequent interactions with "giddy" proponents of that quest. In asking what problem this speedy delivery is intended to solve, for example, he finds that the most consistent answer is, "How to generate, store, and distribute more information, more conveniently, at greater speeds than ever before."[11] Clearly borrowing an idea from Ellul, Postman alludes to the fact that our technological world now asks us to ignore questions of ends and focus only on means. In fact, as Ellul indicates, technological progress tends to reach a state where the means become the ends. Moreover, as Postman describes it, we thus demonstrate the "elevation of information to a metaphysical status: information as both the end and means of human creativity."[12]

Postman says we must recognize not only this optimistic ethos that leads to the confusion of means/ends but also the irrepressible pace of technological change that comes with it. Though he typically speaks of "Western civilization," worth noting is the fact that a sizable portion of that timeline comprises the history of the Christian Church. We might then realize, upon considering such, that most of the Church's life has occurred in the epoch that Postman called the "tool-using era." Only recently has the Church seen a progression to technocracy and then to Technopoly. The last of those periods produced an exponential growth in technologies.[13] In *Technopoly*, Postman drives this point home by contrasting inventions in tool-using culture with today. After the invention of the printing press in the mid-1400s, he explains, "something quite unexpected happened." What was that unexpected thing? In one word, "nothing."[14] For over two hundred years, people had space to determine the best ways to utilize the new technology without having it overwhelm them. A significant contrast is available to us today. There are members among our congregations who have lived to see the introduction of radio, cinema, television, and the internet, each of which has had an impact on the way we live, relate, and (especially) worship.

Admittedly, we might shrug and ask, Why does it matter that believers in earlier epochs saw little technological change in their lives and we have seen much? Postman suggests that one answer lies in the fact that technologies can be ideological. Another is in their culturally corrosive nature.

In regard to the former, Postman argues that we should be very cautious about how technologies modify not only our physical world but also how we conceptualize it. I mentioned earlier that the automobile changed our cities; it also changed what we think about those cities. It altered what we believe about families, government, worship, and other broader concepts. To elaborate on the last of these alterations, I might note that the advent of the automobile created (or, at least, greatly expanded) the idea of "church shopping." Suddenly, believers were not limited to a small number of congregations within walking distance of their homes.[15] To provide a more obscure but equally important example of how technologies change our thought, I would mention the clock. Certainly we realize, upon reflecting, that the clock drastically changed our notion of what "work" might be. With this alteration of our notion of labor came alteration of our notion of "leisure." Given that, we might ask: Was life different for our forebears who did not use an implement that told them the exact hour of the day? Christians should actually have greater avenues for considering these kinds of questions than do secular citizens. We might ask ourselves a narrower question than the one just mentioned. Would fellow believers from the second, eighth, or fourteenth century think it odd that we have come to believe that Sunday worship services should always start at a precise time and always be equal in duration? Recognizing that the Church is not just a worldwide body but also a body that transcends time,[16] we would be wise to ask questions like these.

Postman adds another layer of complexity in regard to the relationship between technologies and our thinking processes by suggesting that we consider our technologies to include more than just mechanical devices such as clocks. As did Ellul, he sees much of our technological drive to be a mere desire for efficiency. Such efficiency can be achieved through what Postman calls invisible "soft technologies" as much as it can by any of our physical contraptions.[17] In *Technopoly*, his examples include standardized

tests, bureaucracies, even scientific taxonomies. His discussion of opinion polls and how they have changed politics is instructive to all of us living in Western democracies.

Of course, communication technologies are especially prone to change how we think, and much of Postman's analysis is devoted to this. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death* he writes, "Moreover, we have seen enough by now to know that technological changes in our modes of communication are even more ideology-laden than changes in our modes of transportation."[18] The title of the book is an indication that he was most specifically concerned with television, as it was the medium that drastically took us from the "generally coherent, serious, and rational" world of the printing press to a world that is "shriveled and absurd."[19] Readers who first encountered the book in the 1980s probably had little difficulty agreeing with its claim that our education, politics, and even our religion had to be "recast in terms that are most suitable"[20] to the medium that became dominant in the second half of the twentieth century.[21]

Some might believe that the absurdity of television content is due to cultural and economic restrictions in the US, not to the medium itself. They might argue, for example, that American television has the features it does due to its being driven by advertising, and that *this* is the source of its illogic. Such a critique fails to note, however, that many aspects of television are inherent to the technology, regardless of what cultural and economic system it finds itself in. Redolent of Ellul's *Humiliation of the Word*, Postman notes that visual symbols have different demands than do written or spoken words.[22] In addition, the immediacy of television distinguishes it. As Innis, McLuhan, Ong, and Ellul have claimed, we need to devote as much attention to the technological form of our communication as we do to its content. The former imposes its will regardless of which culture it finds itself in.

Following from that last sentence, I would argue that the internet is probably "Exhibit A" for how technological change can lead to ideological change. It is also, arguably, the best example of Postman's claims about the potential corrosive nature of technologies, mentioned earlier. Who among us can deny that, along with some wonderful benefits, the World Wide Web includes built-in features that predispose it to certain content-independent

effects, effects that were once obscure but are now blatantly evident? One good example of that would be the medium's ability to allow each user to create his or her own individualized world. Who among us would deny that it appears to be dissolving features of our culture that may be long-standing, beneficial, and worthy of conservation? Certainly the family is one example of this. As more and more of us burrow into an online world that we have created to suit what we perceive to be our individualized needs, interpersonal relationships suffer, and fewer of us are willing to invest the hard work in maintaining such relationships.

I probably need to say little in regard to the negative consequences of the web, but one element from Postman might be helpful in providing evidence of his prescience. A typical argument in support of our newest technological medium is that it immediately provides a wealth of information at our fingertips. Though Postman did not live to see the full development of this phenomenon, more general insights that his books provide are quite apropos. The immediacy issue was addressed earlier. Has our culture (and the Church, embedded within it) carefully considered in what contexts instant access is important, and in what contexts more time is inconsequential? Indeed, has our culture considered contexts in which *slower* sharing of information might be healthy?

As I mentioned previously, we have not done so because we have reached the point where the "ends" of this lightning speed are no longer asked. The means themselves are the ends. Additionally, the very nature of "information" begins to change due to the medium. Technically, this change began with the development of the rotary press and the telegraph, devices that suddenly allowed citizens to be informed of activities and events from distant places. Postman explains that previous to some of our most recent technologies, information did not make sense unless the matter discussed had some relevant context. As he mentions in *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, whatever humans saw or heard was considered superfluous unless it gave "shape, texture, or authority to a political, social, or scientific concept."[23] Moreover, that concept itself was required to adhere to the established worldview. The internet is thus the apotheosis of what Postman sees

as a technologically driven world in which huge parts of what we think of as "information" are context-free.

In addition to being context-free, modern "information" is overwhelming to the point where any of the "shape, texture, or authority" mentioned earlier will quickly lose force. Here Postman moves to a claim that might seem outlandish to twenty-first-century readers: specifically, that information is not always beneficial to society. Upon giving this some consideration, Christians (particularly) may find it plausible. The crux of the argument is that all social-structural elements, including the Church, require systems for limiting information. The point is not that any particular drop of information is bad or threatening. The point is that a tidal wave of information will be overwhelming. Postman's metaphor is actually different from the one I just shared. He pictures a healthy culture as being like a healthy immune system, one that destroys unwanted cells. Regardless of the imagery used, the take-away is that for a community to protect itself it needs to determine what information is of greatest value and worth devoting attention to.[24] Lacking that, individual citizens are so distracted and disheartened by a plethora of mixed messages that they begin to lose confidence in anything. Actually, they begin to have confidence in everything.

A specific manifestation of this principle is found in the technological destruction of the narratives that give us meaning. Here we get into some of Neil Postman's most in-depth discussions of religion, discussions that offer, at their base, appropriate analysis of some obvious problems that our broader culture is facing due to technology. At the same time, however, here is where Postman shares some fundamental assumptions that reveal a failure to understand a thoroughly Christian critique of technology.

Technology, Narrative, and Philosophes to the Rescue

At a surface level, Postman's argument should resonate with believers, and it provides ample description of contemporary problems in our world. Every society, he claims, needs a "narrative," or "story," if you prefer. Postman clarifies his point in *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*. He is not suggesting that *any* kind of story will do. He considers a narrative to be a *big* story (emphasis his) that "might offer explanations of the origins and future of

a people" and give them a sense of purpose.[25] As noted above, a significant problem with our deluge of instantaneous information is its tendency to destroy all narratives. No story can answer every question easily. So a world that does not see some knowledge as more important than other knowledge cannot maintain any binding story. Postman suggests, for example, that science has dissolved "the great narrative of Genesis."[26] He also admits, however, that nothing truly durable has taken its place. The downside to a world where every idea has a channel for dissemination is that there is—if I may coin a term here—a "story-buster" for every story.

As the title of one of his books suggests, he believes that a solution to this problem can be found in the wisdom of the 1700s. I mentioned earlier that the "technocracy" of this presumably halcyon century provided enough tools to solve many human problems but not enough to completely overwhelm human social systems. More importantly, though, according to Postman, the great leaders of that time realized the need to embrace and protect a great narrative. He perceives that the wisest men of the era (for example, Diderot and Voltaire in Europe, Franklin and Jefferson in the United States) were practical thinkers. Rather than working in protracted solitude, attempting to answer every minor human question and create a comprehensive philosophy, they were content to live with ideological inconsistencies. What mattered was that proposed ideas allowed them to address pressing human problems. They were "philosophes," not "philosophers," according to Postman, not seeking information for its own sake but for how they could use information in practical ways to make their communities better. Moreover, they were equally pragmatic in regard to the "big story" they embraced. Postman even shares what he presumes to be a good paraphrase of their generally accepted narrative. Specifically, he writes the following:

> The universe was created by a benign and singular God who gave to human beings the intellect and inspiration to understand His creation (within limits), and the right to be free, to question human authority, and to govern themselves within the framework established by God and Nature. Humanity's purpose is to respect God's creation, to be humble in its awesome presence, and, with honesty toward and compassion for others, to seek ways to find happiness and peace.[27]

This, to Postman, is a good summary of what the philosophes saw as their bedrock, the foundation of the rest of their thought and action. We should note, however, that Postman feels that these philosophes were under no illusion that their chosen narrative was immune to criticism by scientific and philosophical ideologues. In fact, he seems to indicate that the philosophes may not have actually believed any specific element of their common story. As he says in *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century*, the thinkers he most admires felt compelled "to live *as if* there is a transcendent authority."[28] The emphasis is Postman's, indicating he believed the italicized words were vitally important. Admittedly, this greatly alters our understanding of the importance of his proffered narrative. To paraphrase his earlier paraphrase with necessary addenda, I might write, "We will live *as if* the universe was created by a benign and singular God."

Christian readers may have a myriad of problems with this revised worldview, but I wish to focus on two that relate directly to Postman's most useful contributions to our thinking about technology. The first is that, ironically, the author is seeking a technological solution to a human problem. He is doing so by reducing narrative to the role of a "soft technology." Admittedly, it is a soft technology that he believes produces good results, but it fits his description of a soft technology nonetheless. In *Technopoly*, he actually says as much, observing that "religious tradition serves as a mechanism for the regulation and valuation of information."[29] Though every Christian should appreciate Postman's keen analysis of our "crisis of narrative," we should be cautious about using the biblical story as a tool for developing social cohesion. Indeed, we should completely reject a "wink-wink" agreement whereby many of those reciting and hearing the story see it as nothing more than a talisman. To us, the "great narrative of Genesis"[30] is revealed truth. We may have disagreements about the literal and figurative elements therein, but we are adamant that many of those elements point to Jesus Christ, whom we see as the very center (and end) of the grand narrative that proclaims "In the beginning." To riff on an idea from the Apostle Paul, "If we merely live *as if* Jesus were true, we are to be pitied more than any other human beings."

This flows quite logically to my second point. By now we should recognize that Postman is quite adroit at consistently recognizing technology's temptations to confuse means and ends. Even so, from a Christian perspective, his proposal to use the grand eighteenth-century narrative as a remedy for societal ills does just that. To be clear, Postman obviously believes that technology for technology's sake is folly. Throughout his books, he intimates, or boldly claims, that technology should be a means to ends, and the ends are things like loving families, quality education, or engaged politics. This simply raises another question, however. Are *those* ends, or means? Postman is, thus, somewhat like the proverbial cosmologist who believes that the earth rests on the back of an elephant. The cosmologist must consider what the elephant rests on; Postman must consider what families, education, and politics are for. For those who truly believe the narrative of the Bible, these three aspects of humanity are certainly means, not ends. We might sometimes be tempted to think of any or all of them as the *summum bonum*, but in our lucid moments we realize this not to be the case.

Technology, Revelation, and the (Truly) Loving Resistance Fighter

By alluding to these shortcomings in Postman's thought, I am not suggesting that his work is of no value. As I hope the bulk of this essay indicates, I feel that Christians can greatly benefit from his ideas. His concise analysis of the role of technology should help them recognize some of the characteristics and negative repercussions of their lived environment. Moreover, on those occasions when he offers advice on how to live with technology, his proposals fall in line with descriptions provided above, and are wholly appropriate for Christians.

At a deeper level, where Christians might gather motivation and meaning for their response to technology, his work begins to diminish in value. Much of his prescriptive writing is at the end of *Technopoly*, where he offers advice for how readers might live with the implications of his analysis. He does this with a degree of hesitation, admitting that he is "armed less with solutions than with problems."[31] Even so, he proceeds to suggest how to react to the dangers of a Technopolistic world. One element of his advice

is to live as "loving resistance fighters." He supplies nine defining qualities of such people. One, for example, is that resisters should "refuse to accept efficiency as the pre-eminent goal of human relations." A second is that those who resist "do not confuse information with understanding." As a final example, resistance fighters are people who "do not believe that science is the only system of thought capable of producing truth."[32]

In line with much I have shared here, I would note that these guidelines are completely suitable for Christians. To move Postman's abstract ideas to a more concrete level, I would say that the Church (and individual Christians) should be very skeptical of the idea that everything must be done faster and with fewer steps. This is especially the case in human relations. With a vision of eternity in mind, followers of Christ should know that the ticking of a clock is not always the best measure of reality. In line with another element of Postman's advice to resisters, the Church should recognize that information, by itself, is often little more than a distraction. Only when placed in the grander narrative of theological history does it afford its greatest use. Lastly, I might comment that Christians should be extremely bold when it comes to reminding fellow citizens of the limitations of science (especially social science).[33] They, more than most, should be prepared to highlight a source of truth that stands beyond empiricism and reason.

This insight actually brings my discussion full circle to where I began this essay, the subject of how Postman contrasts with Jacques Ellul. Obviously there is a significant distinction to which I did not allude at the beginning, the theologies the authors used in their writing. Postman was raised Jewish and had a very good understanding of Hebrew Scriptures.[34] Wariness toward religion, however, led him to take a secular, rationalist approach throughout his texts. He saw narratives provided by faith traditions as bases for encouraging a sense of human origin and purpose. He was suspicious of those who believe that any person can obtain "Truth" from revealed religion.[35] Ellul's perspective was radically different. As most readers of this journal know, he had a profound conversion experience as a young man and remained committed to Christianity throughout his life. Upon becoming a professor and author, he published many purely sociological treatises, but for each of those books he wrote a Scripture-grounded counterpoint that

relied heavily on Christian truths. Given this, while Ellul might have agreed with much of Postman's advice on how to live as a "resistance fighter," he undoubtedly would emphasize that the nature and purpose of Christian resistance is radically different from secular resistance. Ellul's perspective separates tremendously from Postman's here. Ultimately, then, Christians will find more benefit in reading the former.

Postman's secular vision in *Technopoly* was one of human power—through a combination of rationalism and narrative-based communal purpose—to manage and manipulate technology for good rather than for bad. As part of this, his advice to "loving resistance fighters" proposed a return to an earlier period in American history. He wrote, "You must always keep close to your heart the narratives and symbols that once made the United States the hope of the world and that may yet have enough vitality to do so again."[36] More importantly, he suggested that proposing a new educational curriculum was the best way for American culture to address the problems of Technopoly.

Ellul, on the other hand, took a decidedly Christian approach to the issues I have described above, communicating that our "resistance" is paradoxically both necessary and futile, at least in this age. In *The Meaning of the City*, his theological response to *The Technological Society*, he devoted the last chapters of the book not to describing how Christians can reform the city (it being a symbol of human reliance on technology) but to describing how Jesus Christ will make all things new.[37] This message is perhaps even more clear and commanding in his expressive book *What I Believe*.[38] In that work he clearly stated that if we ignore revelation and abandon truth, the only thing we can resort to is power. Our love of technology, of course, manifests this.

An essential step in our necessary and futile attempts to overcome technology is thus an act of truth, but also an act of love that supersedes anything Postman imagined from his resistance fighters. We may find Postman's advice useful as a means of pushing back against technology, but bigger issues are at stake. Ellul argued that if we expect our own use of power to save us from technology, we are doomed. Some detail in the form of a lengthy quotation is merited here:

> But this permanent orientation of Jesus, this express choice not to use power, places us Christians in a very delicate situation. For we

> ought to make the same choice, but we are set in a society whose only orientation and objective criterion of truth is power. Science is no longer a search for truth but a search for power. Technology is wholly and utterly an instrument of power; there is nothing in technology other than power. Politics is not concerned about well-being or justice or humanity but simply aims at achieving or preserving power. Economics, being dedicated to a frenzied search for national wealth, is also very definitely consecrated to power. Our society is the very spirit of power.[39]

Completely accepting the revelation he experienced as a youth—a revelation Postman used only instrumentally—the French existentialist Christian saw truth and love fully presented in Jesus Christ. Though omnipotent God, Christ came among us and chose *not* to use power, though he had every ounce of it at his disposal.

Only through a reliance on something higher can we find hope. This hope requires action, but also recognition of the fallen nature of humanity and the need for grace. It requires a commitment to our world and our neighbor that cannot be grounded in a socially constructed notion of our value and purpose. Most importantly, in addition to action it requires submission. A willingness to abstain from taking control, for the sake of something better, is thus an act of truth, love, and grace. For Ellul, then, this is our model as resistance fighters.[40] As he wrote, "Today only a nonuse of power has a chance of saving the world."[41]

Notes

1. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 2005). Originally published in 1985.
2. See https://ncte.org/awards/george-orwell-award/.
3. Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
4. Given the fact that Postman admits to not using a word-processor for his books, this word is both figuratively and literally true.
5. Neil Postman, *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future* (New York: Vintage, 1999), 12.

6. Postman, *Technopoly*, 24.
7. Postman, *Technopoly*, 41.
8. Lest the reader presume the uppercase lettering is a mistake, I might mention that in the book he capitalizes this word but not the titles of the earlier epochs.
9. The drawback to using the example of the automobile (though I think it a useful and important example) is that it might lead readers to think of Postman's notion of "ecological" change exclusively in the realm of biology and chemistry. To contemplate how technological change is ecological change in Postman's broader sense, we can consider the introduction of the internet. Most anybody who thinks about it can agree that today's world is not simply the world of the 1980s plus the internet. Today's world is radically different from the world of the 1980s because of our facile adoption of such a powerful technology. I will discuss this in more detail later.
10. Postman, *Building a Bridge*, 151.
11. Postman, *Technopoly*, 61.
12. Postman, *Technopoly*, 61.
13. I might note that in computer technology there is actually a "law" that describes this inordinate speed of change. It is called Moore's Law. To my knowledge, I have no relation to the one who proposed the law.
14. Postman, *Technopoly*, 65.
15. For an elaboration of this idea, see Carl Trueman, "Which Henry Caused the Reformation?" *First Things*, October 31, 2017. https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2017/10/which-henry-caused-the-reformation.
16. Admittedly, there are small parts of the world that have not entered what Postman calls the era of Technopoly, and there are subcultures everywhere that do their best to subvert it. With that in mind I would mention that we could also find correctives at the present time. Certainly, though, all citizens who lived in what Postman sees as the tool-using era would provide us with valuable insights into our lives if we listened to them. G.K. Chesterton's notion of the "democracy of the dead" seems appropriate here. Perhaps one of the ways of avoiding ideological entrapment by our tools is to occasionally ask ourselves what believers who lived before us might say if they observed our use of those tools. See G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: John Lane, 1908), 85.
17. Postman, *Technopoly*, 89.
18. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 157.

19. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 16.
20. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 8.
21. Postman's insights into the development of the "electronic church" are still worth thinking about today. See *Amusing Ourselves*, 116.
22. Postman, *Amusing Ourselves*, 121.
23. Postman, *Building a Bridge*, 86.
24. Certainly the Christian church, by its very nature, can provide a good example of this through patterned devotion to the reading the Bible, both as individual members and as congregations. Given that all citizens in a community have finite time for attending to information, the more time any of them devote to Scripture, the less time they devote to information that is antagonistic to it.
25. Postman, *Building a Bridge*, 101.
26. Postman, *Technopoly*, 50. His statements about this in *Technopoly* may be a little strongly worded. Or, at least, he fails to recognize that a sizable portion of the population still recognizes elements of the first book of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as vital to their understanding of the world.
27. Postman, *Building a Bridge*, 107.
28. Postman, *Building a Bridge*, 110.
29. Postman, *Technopoly*, 80.
30. Postman uses those exact words (or, "the great tale of Genesis") multiple times in both *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* and *Technopoly*. See for example *Building a Bridge*, 10; *Technopoly*, 50.
31. Postman, *Technopoly*, 182.
32. Postman, *Technopoly*, 184.
33. Postman is recommending not a rejection of science and reason but a recognition of the limitations of both. The former is symptomatic of postmodernism, which he worries can cast a "devilish spell" on us. See *Building a Bridge*, 8.
34. Lance Strait, a longtime student of Postman, provides some good thoughts on this topic. See Lance Strait, "The Judaic Roots of Neil Postman's Cultural Commentary." *Journal of Media and Religion* 5 (2006), 196.
35. He gave numerous indications of this concern. As an example, in *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* he argues that reading Scripture "as universal truth, not a human telling," degenerates into "Inquisition, Jihad, Holocaust." Rather than seeing

any revelation as truth, he saw it as a tool. For example, he wrote, "It is permissible, I think, for those of us who disapprove of the arrogance of fundamentalism to borrow some of their memories."

36. Postman, *Technopoly*, 182.
37. See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970) and Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Knopf, 1965).
38. See Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
39. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 150–51.
40. Students of Ellul will certainly realize an ironic twist here. Ellul was an actual resistance fighter during World War II. Though Postman seemed to worry that claiming to find Truth in religion would lead to dreadful acts such as the Holocaust, Ellul's conception of Truth in Jesus Christ convinced him to risk his life to help Jews escape occupied France.
41. Ellul, *What I Believe*, 151.

A Christian Approach to Technology

Richard Stivers

Global warming, mass extinction of animal species, plastic islands in the ocean, freshwater and air pollution, pandemics, the nuclear arms race, cyber piracy and attacks, the race to control outer space, racial, ethnic, and sexual inequality, the proliferation of authoritarian political leaders and fundamentalist religious groups, the widespread use of artificial intelligence at the expense of human intelligence, the utter rapaciousness of financial capitalism, the chaos of the internet, the subordination of language to the visual image, the omnipresence of propaganda and advertising. Science fiction? Conspiracy theory? No, our hopeless reality.

Technological progress has caused or abetted these problems, while God appears absent from the world. We look to technology to solve the very problems it has created—we do not need God. In *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, Jacques Ellul argues that today the Church needs to rethink the question of technology in light of the abandonment of God and the human response of hope.[1] Ellul maintains that it is not unbelievers but Christians who are making God keep his distance. God may still be present in the life of a small group or an individual, but not in the Church, a Church of little faith. Yet he qualifies this by saying that Christians still do all kinds of good works. The problem is the technological, political, and psychological structures that have closed the world to God and turned Christians into idolaters.

Many Christians believe that the use of technology is exclusively a moral problem. Technology, it is argued, is our own creation and neutral in and of itself. The issue is our use of it. Each technology presents moral problems; therefore we must develop an ethical system to cover topics such as clon-

Stivers, Richard. "A Christian Approach to Technology." *Ellul Forum* 67 (Spring 2021): 47–56. © Richard Stivers, CC BY-NC-ND.

ing, genetic engineering, nuclear war, pollution, and so forth. Unfortunately, Ellul points out, this view of technology is wrong, and hence our ethics will be abstract and misguided. The reality of technology is that it constitutes a system so that no technology can be separated from the others. Moreover, modern technology is exclusively about power and efficiency, which preclude any effective control of it.

In *Medical Power and Medical Ethics*, J.H. van den Berg argues that medical ethics has failed to take into account the power of medical technology.[2] In not recognizing the great power of medical technology, the norms of medical ethics are largely irrelevant. The power of medical technology is directed to keeping people alive no matter what pain and suffering that entails. The efficiency of the medical technology is appreciated in and of itself, without regard for its consequences. He realizes that as power increases, the effectiveness of values decreases. In a technological society, power itself is turned into a value, the supreme value.

Christians can participate in the ethical discussion about technology while simultaneously realizing that technology's real threat is spiritual. Technology is a spiritual power, not just a material power. It is difficult for Christians to recognize this, because for several centuries we have reduced religion to morality and reduced morality to a few symbolic issues, such as abortion, homosexuality, inequality, and pollution. In doing so we have downplayed other moral and spiritual conflicts.

The spiritual problems that technology poses for Christians can be summarized as follows: Technology is our idol, replacing the true God; it destroys meaning in discourse, hindering our ability to hear God's word; it establishes itself as truth, negating Jesus Christ; as creator it contains all possibilities, whereas Scripture maintains that with God everything is possible and every possibility is love; it imposes itself as fate over against Christian freedom.

Technology as Idol

The concept that best helps us understand the spiritual dimensions of an idol is the sacred. In *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade argues that

the sacred is a spontaneous human creation that has three properties: power, reality, and absolute value.[3] The sacred is perceived as all-powerful. We are ambivalent about sacred power, both fearing and desiring it. We wish to harness this power to our own advantage.

Today no power is greater than technology. Jacques Ellul has analyzed this at great length in *The New Demons*.[4] The power of technology is everywhere evident, from nuclear power, space flight, military weapons, artificial intelligence, the internet, and psychological manipulation, to name but a few examples.

The goal of modern technology is the power of efficiency. Efficiency contains two components that do not always work together. One is efficacy, the most successful outcome. Can we keep making cars more fuel-efficient? The second is achieving the most (even if not the most efficacious) with the least. Can we produce more cars with less expenditure of time, money, and human labor power?

The second dimension of the sacred is its reality. The sacred appears to be that which is most real. It appears that Eliade is talking about truth, for he maintains that people want to live as close to the sacred as possible. In traditional societies, sacred space lay within nature. The center of the village was thought to be the place where the world was created. Reality was secular but contained the truth of the sacred. In technological societies, our smartphone is the center of the technological universe, the place where we create our own reality.

Truth can be contrasted with two different opposites: falsehood and reality. In *The Sickness unto Death*, Soren Kierkegaard provides a discussion of the former,[5] whereas in *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul examines the latter.[6] In both cases—truth and falsehood, and truth and reality—there is a hierarchy, in which truth, the higher, defines both itself and its opposite, the lower. Only truth enables us to define falsehood, and only truth enables us to understand reality. Ellul contrasts truth with empirical reality. Language allows us to explore meaning and truth, whereas the visual image refers to empirical reality that is material and can be quantified. For Christians, truth is Jesus Christ, his life, his words and actions. In a technological civi-

lization, truth is technology, for it represents the ability to manipulate and even create reality.

We have upset the hierarchy of truth and falsehood by making the two terms equal. When truth and falsehood are equal, the difference in value disappears. Truth becomes whatever we want it to be. Technology in the form of the media, but especially propaganda, the news, advertising, and public relations, provides us with the ability to create reality as truth and to turn falsehood into truth.

Technology plays havoc with reality. It fragments culture and thus destroys a shared symbolic reality. The main source of symbols is the media, especially advertising. These symbols, however, are transitory and segmented and do not convey meaning but only information. Without effective symbolism, reality becomes schizophrenic: part of it is experienced in the dramatized information of the media, the other part in the statistical information of the computer. Our own reality escapes us.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard explores the nature of actuality (for the individual) and reality (for society). Reality is a dialectic of necessity and possibility. For there to be freedom, both necessity and possibility must exist. Without possibility, the necessity of social norms and power becomes oppressive and enslaving; without necessity, the possibility of freedom remains only a fantasy. The ability to turn possibility into actuality is the will to act. Freedom always begins with the individual.

Today, reality is in the media, but reality has been reduced to mere possibility. The media presents us with entertainment, escape, endless possibilities. It is an imaginary world of celebrities, superheroes, demons, angels, monsters, conspiracy theories, and every conceivable plot. Our own lives, full of loneliness, anxiety, frustration, anger, and despair, can be traded in for lives of excitement and fulfillment. As Ellul observed in *The Technological Bluff*, when every possibility lies within technology, technological possibility becomes necessity.[7] The media is a necessary escape from technological totalitarianism. Technology has transformed freedom into escape.

Without transcendent truth, reality becomes mere possibility. First, science became the source of truth as fact. Then science itself was scrutinized, to

the conclusion that there was no way to escape subjectivity—assumption, ideology, history. Science and facts were relativized. Subsequently, the fact became politicized, so that it becomes whatever serves one's group interests. Consequently, paranoid conspiracy theories abound. Conspiracies are always possible and thus real. Technology and politics work in tandem to create a world of possibility beyond our understanding and control. The necessity of the technological system and the political state remains in the shadows.

The Church is faced with the formidable task of helping people return to reality, and this can be done only by bringing truth—Jesus Christ—back into reality. If Christians cannot do this, we will refuse to confront the cultural and environmental crises for what they are: the work of autonomous humans living without God's love and without hope.

The third dimension of the sacred is the perception of absolute value. It is contained within the dominant etiological myth, a myth about sacred time when the world was perfect. In the environment of nature, time is circular, and the etiological myth is what Eliade terms the myth of the eternal return, a return to the golden age preceding the creation of the world. Hebrew Scripture frees us from the circular time of nature in announcing a new and different future—the coming of the Messiah. Eventually the Judeo-Christian understanding of the future is secularized as a social utopia, the perfection of society. By the late eighteenth century, time became progress toward the utopia.

In the technological environment, history becomes meaningless. The media helps create an eternal present. Technology supplants the collective experience of history. The utopia is now technological. We have to believe that we are already in a utopia, what Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* called the "promised land of total consumption."[8] An advertisement proclaims, "We can't wait for tomorrow." The indirect meaning is clear: the utopia needs to be and can be now. The technological utopia already exists but can be improved by technology.

The myth of technological utopianism contains four principal symbols: happiness, health, success, and survival. The basic storyline is replete in adver-

tising. Technology brings us total happiness in the abundance of consumer choices, goods, services, and information. Technology will perfect health as it provides a medical solution for every disease, even aging. Technology creates success in every conceivable way: economic, financial, political, military, and cultural. It will provide an algorithm for every environmental and social problem. The prophets of Silicon Valley have told us so. The four symbolic values of technological utopianism are aesthetical values, not ethical or religious. The utopia is an aesthetical paradise, a childish hope for the future.

Paradoxically, despite the mythological claims for technology, unhappiness, poor health, failure, and catastrophe are everywhere in evidence. The social media have brought loneliness and unhappiness, as we compare our lives to those of others. If we measure health by other than a standard of longevity, poor health, including mental health, is universal. The older we get, the more illness becomes our life. Obesity, heart disease, and depression are widespread. The plethora of medical information has made us all hypochondriacs. Success is not a reality for most in the face of growing inequality. Our suicidal relationship to our physical environment shows few signs of weakening. The myth of technological utopianism is a myth in both senses of the term—a falsehood, and a story about the meaning of life. Everywhere, technology contradicts its promises.

To sum up, technology is power, reality, and absolute value. Its omnipresence and perceived omnipotence make us spontaneously regard it as sacred. As Eliade maintains, we do not rationally construct something as sacred; rather, we emotionally acquiesce to it. To live in a technological civilization is to be an idolater of technology. Christian freedom should lead us to reject technological utopianism without rejecting technology itself.

A Christian Response

How should we respond as Christians to modern technology? There is no single or best response. Freedom precludes it. I will sketch one from my own experiences, reading, and reflection. At best, it is a starting point.

It is essential that we desacralize technology and relativize it. This will be extremely difficult, for most people consider it above serious criticism because they are religiously attached to it. Each technology must be evaluated as to whether it deskills the user and dehumanizes the recipient and to how much harm it does to the environment. Because technology has become a system, evaluation of individual techniques can only be preliminary. The technological system as system must first be dismantled. This will not happen, however, without a cultural revolution that recognizes that technology exists to give God glory and to express love of fellow humans and all creation. It would necessarily be accompanied by a decentralization of power in the political state and the elimination of global financial markets.

Until then? We must be bearers of hope in the second coming of Christ. Our hope asks God to make his presence evident once again. Without God, all our remedial efforts will fail. Hope does not mean that we simply wait for God to rescue us. Concurrently, however, humility about our own contribution is required. No matter how heroic our efforts to solve the myriad of cultural, psychological, and environmental problems, we are up against fatalism about technology. The motto is: You can't stop technological progress. But we must regard creation as God's gift. It is ours on loan. In *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth argued that the inner meaning of creation is the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.[9] To exploit creation rather than live in harmony with it is to reject Jesus Christ. Sinful has been our treatment of each other and other living beings. Our hope is an admission of guilt and an act of repentance.

To rethink technology in terms of hope is a monumental problem. We can analyze a set of techniques, or we can examine those techniques that make acceptance of the others possible. We would not accept the terrible consequences of an out-of-control technology were it not for the plethora of psychological techniques: propaganda, advertising, public relations, and all the techniques for the control of others, such as therapy, child-rearing techniques, marital techniques, and techniques for being a friend to yourself or others. These techniques that objectify user and recipient exist to bring us into conformity with technological progress.

Modern technology is exclusively about power; it is inherently violent. Psychological techniques manipulate others and thus do violence to others. They are the inverse of love. To expose them for what they are—techniques of hate—is to expose the entire technological system. We can do little in a technological society to oppose the myriad of techniques, for just by living in such a society we are complicit in its many crimes. We work and live within organizations that employ bureaucratic techniques to control us. We are coerced to make use of the computer and have to consume a multitude of technological goods, services, and information. But the one place we can do more than reject the techniques and substitute a Christian response is the employment of psychological techniques in interpersonal relations, the techniques that one person uses on another. Psychological techniques such as advertising, public relations, and propaganda are collective techniques that we can only reject.

The opposite of psychological technique is love. Love is an individual, not a collective, practice. It is directed to another individual. To practice works of love in a technological society is the most radical act of all. It exposes the technological system at its weakest and most fragile point—it demands that we love technology, which is incapable of loving us, more than God and neighbor. But if God is love, and God has abandoned us, how can we live out love?

Ellul relates hope to faith in *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, and in *The Ethics of Freedom* he relates love to freedom (God's response to human hope).[10] Of course, we know that faith, hope, and love are interrelated, each implying the others. So if we can still hope in a time of abandonment, we can still have faith and practice love. What Ellul is getting at is that God's abandonment invariably leaves behind a remnant, who must live the incognito. Faith, as Kierkegaard observes in *Works of Love*, is inward, a secret, because one's relationship to God cannot be shared directly.[11] One can directly witness about Scripture to another, but with God absent, hope is the way to relate to others. A burning, relentless hope, lived out in a small group, may make the other ask you why you are joyful in the face of our hopeless situation. We can't leave love out of the story, however. Citing Paul, Kierkegaard has a lengthy discussion of "love hopes all things." Kierkegaard does not

directly relate hope to the second coming of Christ, but it is implied. God loves everyone, and one should never give up the hope that the sinner (all of us) will return God's love, for God does not give up hope.

Now, to love another, Kierkegaard maintains, is to help her love God. God is the middle term between me and my neighbor. But like faith and hope, love is ambiguous. The three are recognized only with the work of the Holy Spirit. To have hope for another parallels the hope that God will return and make his presence known. If God is love, then the one indispensable criticism of the technological society and the one radical action he allows us, even in a time of abandonment and fatalism, is the hope of love. Love is an act of hope that God permits us in order to bring him back into our abandoned world, if only in a single encounter. We may not be able to end pollution and global warming, we may not be able to destroy corporations, we may not be able to eliminate the system of computers and artificial intelligence, but we can love.

To be able to love, we need face-to-face encounters with others. Consequently, the social media, which create loneliness, anger, depression, abject conformity, and lead to disinformation and scapegoating, must be boycotted. We have to uphold the primacy of the spoken word in particular, and discourse in general, in the onslaught of the autonomous visual image that destroys meaning and truth, which can be expressed only in and through discourse. We have to become human once again, God's creatures, who are free to listen to the Word of God.

In *The Meaning of the City*, Ellul claims that God will transform and remake our works, even those of pride and rebellion.[12] Hence God will recreate our technological civilization, turning violence into love in the New Jerusalem. We cannot do this; we have already tried to supplant God as creator. What God has left us to do, seemingly of little consequence, is to say no to technological fatalism with free and humble acts of love that hope for God's return to save all humanity and all his creation.

Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1973).

2. J.H. van den Berg, *Medical Power and Medical Ethics* (New York: Norton, 1978).

3. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1961).

4. Strictly speaking, what is sacred is the relationship between technology, on the one hand, and sex and violence in the media, on the other hand. The former is the sacred of respect, the latter the sacred of transgression. The positive pole, the sacred of respect, is dependent upon the negative pole, the sacred of transgression. The consumption of sexual and violent images in the media renews and reinforces the technological order in respect to the consumption of technological objects, services, and information. Sexual and violent images stimulate our desire for technology. For a more detailed explanation see Jacques Ellul, *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975) and Richard Stivers, *Technology as Magic* (New York: Continuum, 1999).

5. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

6. Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word*, trans. Joyce Hanks (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985).

7. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), chap. 11.

8. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), para. 69.

9. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), v. 3.

10. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976).

11. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pt. 2, chap. 3.

12. Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), chapter 6.

Concerning a Christian Response to Technology

J.M. van der Laan

Who can deny that gasoline-, solar-, and battery-powered devices, not to mention cellphones, computers, and their extensions, structure our everyday existence? Who can deny that techniques orchestrate life today, whether in business, medicine, education, leisure activity, politics, or even the Church, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic? Technology is our catch-all term for this aspect of our life today. It is both the dominant feature and the force in our lives. It is a total environment; we can even say it is our *reality*. We live and breathe in and for technology. How should the Church address this situation? What should Christians say and do about this our undeniable current condition?

Often enough, we hear the Church explain, using the same arguments the world uses, that technology is not a problem as long as it is used right. However, as Jacques Ellul pointed out, new technology is typically and "necessarily used as soon as it is available, without distinction of good or evil."[1] We do not really make conscious decisions about whether or not to use the available technologies, nor do we really have a choice about how to use a technology, since its use is predetermined by its fundamental design. Technologies function as they are devised—hammers hammer, saws saw, computers compute, knives cut, guns shoot bullets, automobiles transport people and hurtle down highways, televisions are made for watching, and so on—but also not as intended or expected. For example, knives and guns can be used to injure and kill other living beings. Automobiles are involved in major and minor accidents, causing injury and death. What is more, they contribute an enormous amount to environmental pollution. Television trivializes and turns everything it broadcasts, whether educational or po-

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litical content, pleasant or unpleasant news, peace or war, humorous or serious programs, into mere entertainments.[2] Social media both connect and disconnect people, indeed may disconnect individuals even more than they connect them. Many studies have demonstrated that our current devotion to and use of digital devices and media has not liberated us as much as increased our fear, paranoia, and isolation.[3] Amazon and Google provide truly astonishing assistance and possibility but also openly and surreptitiously collect information on (un)witting users, which those companies then use in whatever ways they choose. Technology succeeds and fails, not because it is used correctly or incorrectly but because its failures are co-extant with its successes. The two cannot be separated from each other. There is no such thing as a neutral technology whose good or evil depends on how it is used. Technology in fact erases the distinctions between good and evil, true and false, natural and artificial, real and simulated. As Marshall McLuhan observed, "Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot."[4]

Nor can the Church argue that technology can, as it were, simply be "baptized" for our use and in that way be brought under control and made acceptable for use by Christians. As with the idea of proper and improper use, this reasoning is false. Technology today is unlike technology at any other time in human history: it resists any such "baptism," transformation, or control. It is not a question merely of machines or digital devices, what we can call material technology (tools, artifacts, and mechanisms) but of non-material technology as well (methods, procedures, and strategies), in a word, *techniques* used to engineer and program individuals and society, from students in school and employees at work to commerce, the environment, and human health. Everything, every situation, and everyone becomes something to be controlled and optimized, made to operate like a machine, all in the service of efficiency and utility. While there may seem to be many separate, individual technologies in our world today, they actually constitute a vast ensemble of innumerable, interconnected technologies that combine to form one great, unified system. In Ellul's judgment, technology "is not a collection of technical goods which may be freely used, but a total ideological and pragmatic system which imposes structures, institutions, and modes of behavior on all members of society."[5] As an all-encompassing

system, technology is now utterly beyond our control. Far from transforming technology as we would wish it to be, it transforms us, making us over in its own image, ultimately to the point of dehumanizing us who are made in the image of God.

Although technology includes techniques as well as devices, most people today primarily think of technology as those things connected to the digital universe. In consequence, I restrict my comments here to such examples. The *Washington Post* reported that in 2019, on average, "American 8-to-12-year-olds spent 4 hours and 44 minutes on screen media each day. And teens average 7 hours and 22 minutes—not including time spent using screens for school or homework."[6] *PC Magazine* similarly reported that the average adult spent 5.9 hours per day with digital media in 2018.[7] How different are we Christians in our use of and devotion to technology? Most of us own and employ all the various technologies that everyone else has and uses. We and our children spend hours each day with our screens—at school, at work, at home. The vast majority of us and our children have and regularly use and have become dependent on, even enslaved to, automobiles, smartphones, PCs, TVs, video game consoles, and the like. Like so many others, we Christians devote hours to Facebook, email, Twitter, Instagram, digital games, YouTube, Google, Amazon, and texting, not to mention the myriad other technological interactions now on offer. Like everyone else, we Christians sit next to or across from each other but pay more attention to our smartphones than to the other person(s) there with us. And we do so with little or no thought to whether we should do so or not. We even make excuses for doing so.

The Church is certainly not to be anti-technology, but it must speak to the place and role of technology in our lives, in the lives of individual believers, and in the corporate life of the Church, especially in an age when technology has such dominance and power. Along with many others, I have argued that technological idealism (or utopianism) is the dominant ideology of the world today.[8] It is hardly an exaggeration to say that the world loves, even worships, technology. The world believes in continuous technological progress, ultimately resulting in a new idyllic existence. In this belief system, technology will solve all our problems, eliminate our woes, cure our ills, and

heal our iniquities. The world sees technology perform miracles: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the mute speak, the hopeless at last have hope. Its blessings for humanity seem to be without number and new every day.

In the world's view, technology enhances our existence and makes life ever better. It is the bearer of all good gifts: it gives us our crops, our health, our jobs, our shelter. It promises us ease, convenience, and comfort, but above all, technology increases our freedom and power. In this worldview, technology becomes the machine of unlimited possibility and inevitable progress, of the advance and improvement of all conditions: mechanical and organic, material and psychological, physical and spiritual. As the world sees technology, it offers otherwise unattainable knowledge; it represents the source of new, fabulous powers; it bestows gifts upon humanity and remedies the ills of society; it unites us with one another; indeed, it *perfects* the world *and* humanity. Whether in matters of health, environment, or prosperity, "salvation" is not expected from Jesus Christ but from technology. How different really are the beliefs of Christians about technology?

Like God, technology is glorious. Like God, it is incomprehensible and impossible to master. Like God, it appears to be omnipresent, omniscient, and omnipotent, especially as embodied in the internet/World Wide Web. Last, but certainly not least, we request services of all kinds from it, much as we once prayed to receive guidance and good gifts from the deity. We rely on its strength and its revelations (if not grace). Inspiration comes not from God but from the servants and custodians of technology, of the next techniques for business, education, and farming, of the computer and all its appendages, of the internet. But the Church knows that technology is not God. The Church has a duty to expose and reject such beliefs as false.

If we wish to determine what a particular person or society holds sacred and values above all else, we need to identify what he or she or they most think about, pay attention to, and devote their time and lives to. Today, there can be no doubt that technology with all its expressions, but especially the smartphone or personal computer and internet, have now become *sacred*. Just try and take away someone's smartphone, or something now as ordinary as a television, and see what resistance and ire result. Citizens of

the technological society cannot, must not, and dare not criticize, much less do without, technology, which by definition is its very foundation, necessarily its most important and revered possession, indeed, its *summum bonum* and most sacred reality. To do so would be, in effect, to blaspheme. But the sacralization of technology is the true blasphemy, as the Church must know. Its task is then to contest faith and devotion to the technological system.

Amazon, Google, Facebook, and Microsoft are massive monopolies of products, services, information, and more. While the pretext is that they provide us with countless benefits, the harm they do is largely ignored. At one time, "Don't be evil" was Google's unofficial motto and was included in its corporate code of conduct. Google's parent company Alphabet has now repackaged that directive (or reminder) as "Do the right thing." Both sound noble but really express something innocuous, and they actually mask whatever questionable practices Alphabet and its subsidiaries engage in. One of those subsidiaries, YouTube, is "notorious for pushing users toward [...] conspiracy theory videos, as a consequence of the most common user choices on the site and how the platform's predictive algorithms are written."[9] But conspiracy theories present fantasies and outright lies as truth. Seemingly benevolent, Google stands accused of helping countries such as China repress political dissent. Besides handling or using posted data in highly questionable ways, Facebook has permitted content that ranges from hate speech and fake news to incitement of violence and criminal activity. How and when has the Church addressed such issues as they relate to Christians?

The domination of technology in the world today leads or even compels the Church to adopt and adapt to, in ever greater measure, whatever technology has to offer. Certainly, the prevalence of technology in the Church varies from denomination to denomination and congregation to congregation. Some have likely maintained a healthy distance from technology, while others have welcomed it into the worship service itself. Many if not most church communities have asserted that they need to change with the times, to adopt new technologies as they emerge in order to keep pace with the changing attitudes and behaviors of their congregations. They want to be "relevant." I cannot think of any Old Testament or New Testament efforts

to be "relevant," however. Church leaders maintain that they are responding to what they perceive the members of their churches need and want. And they argue that by employing popular technologies as they become available, they either retain members or draw in new believers and members. A Christian friend of mine and a leader in his church community informed me that his church has had a Facebook account for several years. Recently, his church launched a Twitter account. In each case, his church community never paused to consider or analyze these decisions. Rather, it adopted those technologies without a second thought, without thinking about the pros and cons of using Facebook and Twitter, without evaluating them and their effects. Such choices and actions are typical. No one brought attention to Facebook policies about content or (so-called) privacy. No one noted that Facebook uses the data from all its subscribers to fashion a platform that manipulates and controls users. No one paused to point out that Twitter spreads inanity and triviality as well as rumor, falsehood, and malice.

Let me offer one other concrete example where churches have employed a technology without understanding it, neither how it functions nor what deficiencies or effects it has. Computer projectors and big screens are now a part of a great many church services. Song lyrics, Bible verses, pictures, and sermon content appear as PowerPoint displays at the front of church sanctuaries and auditoriums. Little if any critical thought can have gone into such choices. In the world, PowerPoint has become ubiquitous and the preferred mode of presentation for anything and everything. The Church, too, has found a use for it. Critics such as Edward Tufte have pointed out serious problems with PowerPoint, however.[10] Even if used as intended, PowerPoint restricts and minimizes content. It focuses attention not on the words and Word spoken by the preacher but on a few phrases (ideally five bullet points of four words each) and images on the screen, which distract the audience and work against concentration. PowerPoint presentations diminish and trivialize the content of the message to the point of meaninglessness. Worst of all, PowerPoint devalues the word, in this case, God's Word for our lives, since it transforms the message into bits and pieces like sound bites, and with the addition of pictures to make the presentation more "interesting" or appealing, the visual takes precedence over the

spoken Word. Finally, PowerPoint transforms everything into entertainment, hardly something a church service should be. The Church preaches and teaches that Christians are to be in, but not of, the world, but as the Church too readily conforms to the world and to technology, the people of the *Book* (the *biblia*) and the *Word* (the *logos*) too easily become a people of technology instead.

We Christians must ask and identify in what, or better, in whom, we put our faith. Of course, when confronted with such a question, we all answer: in God! We must likewise ask what or who it is we serve. Again, we answer: God! But how honest are those answers? At the end of *The Technological System*, Ellul concludes that "the human being who uses technology today is by that very fact the human being who serves it."[11] That comment casts light on what may well be most troubling about the intersection of Christian life and technology. Who, if not the Christian, should know that no man can serve two masters?

The world loves technology with all its heart, soul, strength, and mind. It cannot wait for the next smartphone, television, laptop, tablet, program, game, or app. The world spends its hours and days on screens, texting, tweeting, emailing, and surfing the web. Does the Church, do Christians, behave any different? Don't we live almost entirely as the world lives in relation to technology? How have we limited our use of technology? Of automobiles, televisions, PCs, smartphones, or of techniques for management, education, and relationships? We stand convicted. In recent decades, the Church has had little or nothing to say about technology except to follow the rest of the world and embrace it with more-or-less open arms. However, the Church must lead, not follow, the world. The Church must remember that we are to have no other gods before our God, the only God. If the Church is to be the Word and the Light to a world in ignorance and darkness, if it is to expose the ideologies of the world as false, it must challenge the faith that the world (and the Church) has in technology.

If technology takes up so much of our time, if it occupies so many of our thoughts, if it commands such a place of importance in our lives, if it commands our attention (even obedience), it vies with our allegiance to God; indeed, it displaces God in our lives. It is a power and dominion at odds

with the command to have one God and no other. It is a false god, an idol, and must be exposed and rejected as such. It must be stripped of its power over us. And when even Christians look to technology for answers and solutions, even for meaning, we become idolators, we fall away from Christ the only Savior. We are then like those people in the Bible who did not first seek to know the will of God, because we first seek to know the will of technology. Technology removes all boundaries. It promises human beings a life without limits, where everything is possible and permissible, a life without constraints. To expect or seek such a life is an act of rebellion against God. It is to commit the original sin again, the sin of wanting to know what God knows, indeed, to want to be God. With all its capabilities, technology holds out the promise of self-deification.

The twenty-first-century Christian Church forgets or ignores its ancient mandate and fundamental obligation to challenge and reject the values of the world, which now leads a life governed and shaped by technology, a life that conforms to the values of technology. Ellul alerts us in *The Technological Society* to "the subjugation of [...] new religious life to technique."[12] In its embrace of technology, arguing that it must do so to reach a twenty-first-century, technological society, to "meet people where they are," the Church relinquishes its obligation to confront, unmask, and deny the world and its values. Instead of challenging technology, the Church harmonizes with it. As he points out, "it was formerly believed that technique and religion were in opposition and represented two totally different dispensations."[13] Of course, that opposition has disappeared, and there is now only one dispensation, to appropriate that old theological term: it is that of technique or, to use the more common term, technology. The Church, Ellul asserts in *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, must be "the question that God puts to the world,"[14] but the Church cannot be such a question, when it participates in the great celebration and festival of technology.

In *Works of Love*, Soren Kierkegaard asked, "If it is true, then, that all of secular life, its pomp, its diversion, its charms, can in so many ways imprison and ensnare a man, what is the earnest thing to do?"[15] In precisely that way, technology—the preeminent facet of secular life today—has captivated us *and* taken us captive. It has caught us as in its web or net and holds us fast.

Kierkegaard posits two possible answers to his question: "either from sheer earnestness to be silent in the church about things, or earnestly to speak about them there in order, if possible, to fortify men against the dangers of the world."[16] But there is really only one answer and course of action, he concludes: "to talk about things of the world in a solemn and truly earnest manner."[17] So it is with technology. The Church is to speak out about those things of the world, specifically, technology that both enchants and entraps us, distracts us and leads us away from faith and hope in God.

As Hubert Dreyfus recognized, Kierkegaard understood true religious life, specifically, true Christianity based on the Incarnation, as "an unconditional commitment to something finite, and having the faith-given courage to take the risks required by such a commitment. Such committed life gives one a meaningful life in this world."[18] For Kierkegaard, such a committed and meaningful existence could be realized only within the religious or spiritual sphere. Arguing from Kierkegaard's position, Dreyfus concluded that today the internet is "the ultimate enemy of unconditional commitment, but only the unconditional commitment of what Kierkegaard calls the religious sphere of existence can save us from the nihilistic leveling [...] perfected in the World Wide Web."[19] Sobering words of warning for a Church that relies more and more on the internet and all its attendant trappings. Ultimately, Dreyfus reminds us, the internet promotes the demise and elimination of meaning.[20] What could be worse for a Church, for the body of believers, which ostensibly exists to point to the source of all meaning?

The Church and individual Christians must then lay bare the true nature of and forsake the false values and meaning offered by technology. We must curtail our use of technology, even renounce the technologies we love most. We must acknowledge our apostacy and turn to God, not with part of but each with all of our heart, soul, strength, and mind. Let Christians live out lives of faith, hope, and love, not in technology, but in God.

Notes

1. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage, 1964), 99.

2. See Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show-business* (New York: Viking, 1985).
3. See for instance Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).
4. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), 18.
5. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 310.
6. Rachel Siegel, "Tweens, teens and screens: The average time kids spend watching online videos has doubled in 4 years." *Washington Post*, October 29, 2019. https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2019/10/29/survey-average-time-young-people-spend-watching-videos-mostly-youtube-has-doubled-since/.
7. Rob Marvin, "Tech Addiction by the Numbers: How Much Time We Spend Online." *PC Magazine*, June 11, 2018. https://www.pcmag.com/news/tech-addiction-by-the-numbers-how-much-time-we-spend-online.
8. See J.M. van der Laan, *Narratives of Technology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
9. Joanne McNeil, "Search and Destroy." *Harper's Magazine* (February 2020): 14.
10. See Edward Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2003).
11. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980), 325.
12. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 423.
13. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, 423.
14. Jacques Ellul, *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1977), 142.
15. Soren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 62.
16. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 62.
17. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 62.
18. Hubert Dreyfus, *On the Internet* (London: Routledge, 2001), 122, n42.
19. Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 89.
20. Dreyfus, *On the Internet*, 102.

Book Reviews

Husserl, Edmund. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* [1936], trans. David Carr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970. *La crise des sciences européennes et la phénoménologie transcendantale*, trans. Gérard Granel. Paris, Gallimard, 1999.

While a part of the canon for those who are phenomenologists, this book is also helpful for understanding broader issues concerning the philosophy of science, particularly for fields like human psychology. Husserl challenges us to reconsider accepted dogmas in Western science and offers methods for analyzing the world in which we live. Plus, it plays an important role in understanding the twentieth-century intellectual milieu of Ellul and others such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Cody Chambers
Gatesville, Texas

Campbell, Will. *Brother to a Dragonfly* [1977]. New York: Continuum, 2000.

I started reading Will Campbell the same year that I began reading Ellul. I found they shared similar convictions and perspectives on many things. The significant difference is that most of Campbell's books, including this autobiography, are narratives. Ellul and Campbell knew of each other. Ellul contributed to a journal that Campbell co-edited, *Katallagete*. Campbell is a great storyteller. Enjoy the story, look for Ellulian themes, and perhaps it will be a life-changing read for you as it was for me.

Mark Baker
Fresno, California

Bauman, Zygmunt. *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1993.

A book that *Forum* readers would be possibly interested in is one of the many books of the distinguished sociologist of modernity Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017). I could perhaps mention *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), or *Society under Siege* (2002). But I would like to draw the attention to *Postmodern Ethics* (1993). On the second page of chapter 7 (I read the Spanish edition, *Ética posmoderna*), Bauman mentions Jacques Ellul as the one whom he considers to be the most notable interpreter ever of modern Technique. I believe that it was what Bauman called the "intensity" of Ellul's analysis that still explains the relevance of Ellul's thinking. Through his understanding of the internal dynamics of the "technical phenomenon," Ellul still is "the man who had foreseen almost everything" (Porquet), including particular things he had not witnessed yet during his lifetime.

Roelf Haan
Utrecht, Netherlands

Virilio, Paul. *Esthétique de la disparition* [1980]. Paris, Galilée, 2004. *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchman. Los Angeles: Semiotext, 2009.

Virilio outlined a theory of dromology (the science or logic of speed) across several books. In *The Aesthetics of Disappearance* he describes the experience of living in the (technologically driven) society of speed as akin to picnolepsy (petit mal seizures). The result is the opening of spaces that are, at once, in the world yet nowhere at all. One result of this situation is the frantic proliferation of tantalizing images in global mass media that serve to obscure what might otherwise be recognized as disturbing inconsistencies and elisions in market discourse. Readers of Ellul will recognize familiar themes, including the role of popular media in the perpetuation of technique.

Rick Herder
Marshall, Minnesota

Smith, Gordon T. *Wisdom from Babylon*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020.

Wisdom from Babylon offers a timely reminder of the perils and possibilities of church leadership in our contemporary age. In an accessible yet well-researched work, Smith offers insights for understanding the times as well as recommendations for charting a path forward, including a fair assessment of Ellul's contributions and rough edges. By couching his discussion within a clear-cut need for adaptive, virtuous church leadership, Smith resets the conversation on "cultural engagement" through a clear conversation about where we are, what's really going on, what questions we should really be asking, and what possible future should we embrace.

Peter Anderson
Phoenix, Arizona

Ott, Kate. *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019.

I recently read this book as I was preparing a course on ethics in a digital age, drawing on Ellul as well as a range of scholars. In many respects Ott is not very Ellulian in her approach, but she does share with Ellul a perceptive way of engaging the Bible in apprehending social realities. The book has five fascinating chapters on different aspects of the digital world: "Programming for Difference" (on how algorithms create personal worlds), "Networked Selves" (on identity and relationships), "Moral Functions Beyond the Delete Key" (on dataveillance and metanoia), "Creation Connectivity" (an excellent chapter on the neglected material impacts of the virtual world), and "Ethical Hacking and Hacking Ethics" (on disrupting and repurposing the current systems). At the end of each, she offers a brief biblical reflection, with the insights on Babel (chapter 1) and "Swords into Ploughshares" (chapter 5) being the most memorable. I would highly recommend the book and gained much from it, even if I found myself at odds with Ott at times.

Matthew Prior
Egham, England

Lewis, C.S. *The Abolition of Man* [1947]. San Francisco: HarperOne, 2001. *L'Abolition de l'homme,* trans. Irène Fernandez. Paris, Ad solem, 2015.

This short book stems from three lectures that C.S. Lewis delivered at Newcastle in 1943 on the dangers of preferring moral subjectivism over natural law (summed up by the Tao). When objectivity in beauty or ethics or even knowledge is debunked, Lewis presents stern warnings that modern society, due to the "explaining away" of traditional values, will slide into states where man's control over nature will heighten man's control over other men. Ultimately, rationality itself goes out the window when the Conditioners of society justify their controlling agendas in arbitrary ways. As they succumb to subhuman standards, the social drift will tend toward the abolition of our very humanity. In the context of applied Scientism overstepping a healthy, ethics-guided science, Lewis fictionalized all of the themes above in his Space Trilogy, most notably in his concluding dystopia *That Hideous Strength* (1946). Both of his books do well to illuminate Jacques Ellul's concern for the way technocratic values operate outside and above all other corrective values or reasoning. Lewis also anticipates Ellul by describing how the *is*, in the linear march of progress, takes precedence over the *ought*. Altogether, the third essay in *Abolition* presents a gripping vision that finds fuller treatment, one decade later, in *The Technological Society* (1954).

Ted Lewis
Duluth, Minnesota

Junger, Ernst. *The Glass Bees* [1957]. New York: New York Review of Books, 2011. *Les abeilles de verre*, trans. Henri Plard. Paris, Bourgois, 1996.

This novel explores the profound contradiction between technical perfection, which is calculable, and human perfection, which is incalculable. Like any great work of literature, it provides the emotional context of a phenomenon, making it less abstract and more existential.

Richard Stivers
Bloomington, Illinois

Brun, Jean. ***Le rêve et la machine, technique et existence*****. Paris, La Table Ronde, 1992. Jean Brun,** ***Le retour de Dionysos*****. Paris, Desclée, 1969.**

Pour Jean Brun (1919–94), philosophe protestant qui se réclame de Pascal et Kierkegaard, si la technique n'est pas neutre socialement c'est parce qu'elle n'est pas neutre existentiellement. Ses livres de philosophie de la technique s'attachent à mettre à jour les fondements existentiels du rapport de fascination irresponsable que nous entretenons avec les techniques. Dans *Le rêve et la machine* Brun montre que l'homme a d'abord rêvé ses techniques avant de les réaliser et de les mettre en pratique. Selon lui, l'histoire de la technique est commandée par un « onirisme métaphysique » qui investit la technique de la mission de nous faire accéder à une liberté désincarnée, libérée des contraintes spatio-temporelles de l'individuation. Le potentiel de déshumanisation que recèle la technique n'est pas le fruit d'une compréhension du réel trop pauvre, mais plutôt d'un désir actif de rompre les relations avec le réel qui caractérisent l'existence humaine et qui circonscrivent sa finitude. Dans *Le retour de Dionysos* Jean Brun montrait comment le désir de se désindividualiser et de briser la cage du moi alimente toutes sortes de conduites d'exaspération et une culture de la cruauté qui mobilise dans des sabbats techniques ou des orgies techniques le pouvoir de la technique de transmuter et de recomposer le donné naturel. Motorisation frénétique, conquête de l'espace, griserie de la vitesse, création d'organes et d'un exo-organisme artificiels, rêve d'un cyborg : la technique « offre à Dionysos le dépassement exaltant des limites individuelles charnellement vécues ».

Daniel Cérézuelle
Bordeaux, France

Véliz, Carissa. ***Privacy Is Power: Why and How You Should Take Back Control of Your Data*****. New York: Bantam, 2021.**

This book is all about the harm potential of data gathering. Ellul mentioned this in his last lecture to the Institut d'Études Politiques. He said the greatest threat to our freedom would be the technicians who know all about the data-gathering process and thus the validity of the data, and

those who don't know the validity. I would say that the subprime mortgage fiasco in 2008 was an example of this. There are many more problems arising from data-gathering on the massive scale that exists today. What we see today with social media is that Google and others hoover up all our preferences and sell it to those who have a commercial interest in knowing that information, potentially to exploit us. This book is a good case study of Ellul's philosophy, namely, the view that all technological development comes with a cost of some kind, often to our fundamental freedoms. I don't think that Véliz has read Ellul much, but the problems she raises are central to Ellul's concerns, and she articulates the problems very well. Controls are needed, but will the controls work and will they do more harm?

Randal Marlin
Ottawa, Ontario

Eilenberger, Wolfram. *The Time of the Magicians: Wittgenstein, Cassirer, Heidegger, and Benjamin and the Decade That Reinvented Philosophy*. New York: Penguin, 2020.

These philosophers are examined in relation to a search for meaning arising from the social-political upheavals expressed, for example, in two world wars. Wittgenstein showed that meaning was beyond the pronouncements of logic and science; Heidegger located meaning in the anxious encounter with nothingness, the abyss, death, and dissolution; Cassirer found meaning in the cultural formation of symbols against an other; and Benjamin found it in wandering the one-way street of modernity and an erotic urge. The narrative is bracketed by the Cassirer/Heidegger 1929 debate at Davos, Switzerland, where the neo-Kantian–Hegelian philosopher of culture faced the soon-to-be Nazi rector of Freiburg. Culture was at a crossroads with the abrogation of meaning by an irrationality beyond science and logic and by a politicized technology. This study, then, stands well within the Ellulian corpus.

David Lovekin
Hastings, Nebraska

About the Contributors

Rick Clifton Moore is professor of communication and media at Boise State University in Boise, Idaho. His research centers on media and ideology, with much of his recent work being on the topic of media coverage of religion.

John Paul Russo is professor and chair, department of classics, University of Miami. He is the author of *The Future Without a Past: The Humanities in a Technological Society* (winner of the 2007 Bonner Prize), *The Italian in Modernity*, co-written with Robert Casillo (2011), and *Souls of Lonely Places: Late Wanderings in Italy*, forthcoming in Italian from Campanotto, Udine.

Richard Stivers is emeritus professor of sociology, Illinois State University. Using Jacques Ellul's ideas as a springboard, he has written a number of books about technology, notably *Technology as Magic*.

Paul V. Stock is an associate professor at the University of Kansas in the department of sociology and the environmental studies program. He writes about Ellul and technology in relationship to morality, care, and the environment, with a particular emphasis on food and agriculture.

J.M. van der Laan is professor emeritus in the department of languages, literatures, and cultures at Illinois State University. His publications have dealt with literary treatments of technology, the Faust legend, and the intersection of science and the humanities.

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.