The Ellul Forum

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Welcome to the *Ellul Forum*

As the *Ellul Forum* now transitions from one chapter of editorship to the next, it currently operates with an interim editorial team comprised of aspiring scholars in the field of Ellulian studies:

- Emily Hill, Soliciting and Managing Editor (final issue)
- Amy Erickson, Copy Editor
- Anne Dimond, Copy Editor
- Jason Hudson, Book Review Editor
- Greg Wagenfuhr, Layout and Design
- Ted Lewis, Team Convener and Print Coordinator

Our editorial framework is still in transition as we seek a more permanent framework. Our hope is to set rhythms of reception and review which will include the approval process of the Ellul Forum Review Board.

The Ellul Forum continues to accept articles, book reviews and response pieces for forthcoming issues. Please direct all correspondence to ellulforum@gmail.com

Coming up...

Our Fall 2023 issue is now accepting submissions on any topic associated with Ellulian studies. This will broaden the invite for articles that do not need to fit a particular theme.

If you would like to write a response piece to any content in this Spring issue or the previous Fall 2022 issue on the arts, please submit a piece no longer than 1000 words by August 1, 2023, which can be considered for the Fall issue this year.

Our Spring 2024 issue, in honor of our Chicago Conference attention on The Technological Society (70th anniversary for the French printing; 60th for the English edition), will receive articles that directly engage Ellul's thought and text from this book. Thematically, this can also extend to interaction with the other two books that create a trilogy of analysis, namely Ellul's The Technological System and The Technological Bluff.

To widen the capacity for us to print your offerings for this issue, we ask that word lengths land between 2000 and 3000 words. Please view the contributor guide on the IJES website under the Ellul Forum for all other submission specifications.

Finally, we accept both book review recommendations as well as book review writers. Please query your interests or information to ellulforum@gmail.com

The Ellul Forum
Number 70 Fall 2022

Excerpts by Jacques Ellul on Technique, Public Health, and Medicine

Compiled by Ted Lewis

[All notations in brackets are inclusions by Ted Lewis]

1. From *The Technological Society*, "Technique and the State," subsection "Repercussion on the State," p. 252-3.

> *The Technical Organism.* A second consequence of the penetration of the state by techniques is that the state as a whole becomes an enormous technical organism. Thus, nationalization of certain industrial plants not only makes the state an industrial "boss" or technician, but also compels it to revise its techniques of organization and administration….
>
> [Ellul lists nine realms of technique applied by the modern state, one of which is…] Biological techniques (already a reality, although rare), including human stud-farms, euthanasia, obligatory vaccination and medical inspection, and social assistance.

2. From *The Technological Society,* "Technique and the State," subsection "Repercussion on Technique," p. 307-311.

> *The Role of the State in the Development of Modern Techniques.* The state plays a role of prime importance with respect to techniques. …The basic effect of state action on techniques

"Excerpts by Jacques Ellul on Technique, Publich Health, and Medicine" *Ellul Forum* 71 (Spring 2023): 3–7.

is to co-ordinate the whole complex. The state possesses the power of unification, since it is the planning power par excellence in society. In this it plays its true role, that of co-ordinating, adjusting, and equilibrating social forces.

[The next paragraph lists a number of realms coordinated by state-level planning, including "the co-ordination of the medical profession and social security." Ellul then discusses how the state has greater influence wherever the technological apparatus or machinery is greatest or most sophisticated, i.e. the coordination of agriculture and airplanes.] "Airplanes are being used increasingly for sowing, seeding clouds for rain, distributing chemical substances, and so on. But these techniques exceed the resources of peasant co-operatives."

[Ellul proceeds with a discussion of funding scientific research.] The state offers technique possibilities of development which no other agency could offer. It gives research men the necessary means to expedite their research, and, as a consequence, to expedite technique….Only the state can purchase essential scientific equipment and, in addition, give the scientist the indispensable support of its authority.

In innumerable cases (the state) has had to resolve the quarrels of technicians and scientists, as formerly it resolved the debates of theologians. Recall the strife concerning the antitubercular vaccines of Calmette and Guerin; also the reservations of some scientists concerning the polyvalent vaccination which is now obligatory in France. The state alone decided what was to be done in these cases. Moreover, the state clothed its opinion in its authority, which, in a short time, became the authority of the technician. Where necessary, authority was reinforced by compulsion. A complicated system developed. The child who has not been vaccinated cannot be admitted to school; and the child who does not attend school has no right to family subsidies.

Thus the state overcomes the objections of individuals to technical progress.

[And later] The state quickly comes to demand that technique keep its promises and be an effective servant of state power. Everything not of direct interest to this drive for power appears valueless. Just as financiers seek their interest in money profit, the state seeks it in power. In neither case is the motivation disinterested; technical discovery must pay off (313-4).

3. From *The Technological Society*, "Human Techniques," subsection "Review," subheading Medicine, p. 384f.

[In this section Ellul discusses the clandestine use of medical products and procedures to control social deviancy and to maintain a compliant population. He is not addressing official policy for public health, but rather the way the state might use pharmaceutical and surgical interventions to "to modify the human being."]

4. From *The Technological Society*, concluding section titled "Total Integration," p. 414f.

Ellul states his common adage "that technical difficulties demand technical solutions," noting how "no one dreams of applying nontechnical remedies. Men distrust them." He quotes A. Sargent who presents the life-sciences as providing the only hope in our modern times, lest we are hampered by outdated beliefs and mentalities. "Biocracy…represents our only chance of salvation in a moment of our development in which the various metaphysics and systems left over from archaic cultures still corrupt human life." [C. S. Lewis took up these themes a decade earlier in his Space Trilogy and *The Abolition of Man*.]

5. From *The Technological Bluff*, various quotes mostly from Part 1, "Uncer-

tainty" (pages noted below).

[Ellul's final book in the trilogy that started with *The Technological Society* and *The Technological System* emphasizes the obfuscated and detrimental effects of technological solutions that address problems stemming from a technique-driven world. Ellul provides several examples of this in the field of medicine, mixed with his own thoughts about the growing loss of human health.]

> Studies have also shown that the human life which is now prolonged is much diminished and very precarious. Our health is much more fragile. We have less resistance to grief, to fatigue, and to privation. We have less resistance to lack of nourishment, variations in climate, and internal and external stresses. We are more susceptible to infections. Our senses are less sharp, especially sight and hearing. Our nerves are much more fragile (we suffer more from insomnia and distress). We have to take more precautions and are more easily laid up by little things. We have more opportunities in life and live longer, but we live diminished lives and do not have the same vital force. We have to compensate for new deficiencies by artificial procedures that in turn produce other new deficiencies (44).
>
> Every technical operation has a second series of effects. These are not sought but they may be foreseen. Thus a great surgeon once said that surgical intervention replaces one infirmity by another. Similarly, very effective medications might have serious side effects. Accidents are numerous, leading to some 10 percent of all the hospitalizations in France. The use of such medications is justifiable only if the risks associated with them are less than the benefits they confer. A calculation has thus to be made of foreseeable risks and benefits. [Next paragraph] But then there are totally unforeseeable effects (61-62).
>
> Do we have to recall the unexpected side effects of penicillin, or the dreadful scandal of thalidomide? In the latter case, to save the face of science, it was argued that there had been no negligence at the experimental stage. There had been six years of laboratory tests on animals. But it was not possible to imagine every possible result (65).

[Ellul goes on to discuss the classic case of DDT in the 1940s and 50s. Later he moves between toxic chemicals in both agricultural products and pharmaceutical products, noting unpredictable harmful effects, some of which may be irreparable (69)].

> Need we return to the medicalizing of life? Too many medications, too many doctor visits, too much hospitalization, illnesses due to excess medication — these are familiar themes on which there is much agreement. What worries me, however, is the prevailing notion that even the well are sick though they do not know it, so that we have the opposite of the situation in Balzac's *Le medecin de campagne.* Today we live in anxiety and fear. Our technical milieu makes us afraid of sickness. We resort to the doctor-sorcerer-magus. We stuff ourselves with tranquilizers, hypnotics, analgesics (I am no exception). (240)

Ellul also wrote an article entitled "Biblical Positions on Medicine," printed in the *Ellul Forum* 59 (2017): 3–7. Translation © Lisa Richmond. In this article Ellul addresses themes of illness and remedy, life and death, considering the trifold nature of human beings – body, soul, spirit – along with biblical perspectives on healing and resurrection.

Life is Not Living: A Lesson from the Pandemic as Prompted by Ivan Illich

Sajay Samuel

[1]In his remarkably detailed yet encompassing book on Illich's intellectual journey, David Cayley narrates a little-known episode. In 1985, Illich spoke to a group of church leaders assembled by Will D. Campbell — the famed confederate of Martin Luther King — who requested he speak on the topic of Life, which was, in Campbell's words, "tearing the Church apart." Rather than offering a "mollifying prayer" to ease tensions, "Illich instead began with a solemn curse. Raising his hands, he repeated three times, 'To hell with Life!'"[2]

This was an astonishing pronouncement, especially for a man who, though he had renounced his duties, was still a priest in good standing with the Catholic Church. Four years later, Illich would clarify his meaning in another address, this time to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. He implored those theologically trained among the audience to beware their complicity "in the social creation of a fetish which, in a theological perspective, is the perversion of revealed Life into an idol."[3]

Illich's warning about Life becoming a fetish or an idol (depending on one's commitments) anticipates both the purpose and the mode of managing the Covid-19 pandemic. Such phrases as "saving lives," "human lives," and "managing life" were used as rallying cries to manage how people thought and acted during the pandemic. Life was presented as a substantive, as a thing distinct from the activities and thoughts embedded in living. By speaking against Life as if it is a thing, Illich underscored the confusion spread when a verb —living — is transformed into a noun — Life. There is

"Life is Not Living: A Lesson from the Pandemic According to Ivan Illich." *Ellul Forum* 71 (Spring 2023): 9–24.

no such thing as "a Life" except when fabricated as an object to be managed. For example, walking is something most people do in the course of living. Yet, when it is captured by Life, as for instance by a program promoting healthy lifestyles, walking is managed in terms of the number of needed steps. This paper's thesis is twofold: that Covid-19 management took all of humanity as the object to be managed, and that this was feasible when justified in the name of a fetish called Life.

The view of Life as an object for management or government emerged in Western societies around the 18th century. Biopolitics was the name Michel Foucault gave to this logic of government which aimed to manage populations and individuals in the name of fostering life. Over the centuries, biopolitics was discrete and episodic in implementation. The singularity of the management of the Covid-19 pandemic was that it was global, fast, and long lasting relative to both other pandemics, such as the one in 2009 caused by the H1N1flu virus, and to the exercise of biopolitics. Never before in history has the entire human population, in intent if not in fact, been managed. In this paper, I suggest that such an extensive and intensive program to manage all the peoples of the earth was possible precisely because Life has become a fetish.

In the Name of…Life

Barely a year ago, the entire world was in the grip of a pandemic. Though the news-cycle has since moved on to the next disaster — ongoing war over Ukraine, the possibility of war with China — the management of Covid-19 remains a singular event. For about two years, beginning early 2020, the entire human species itself became the object of management. No one in the world was exempt from the procedures to manage the pandemic, all of which were instituted to protect, prolong, and save Life. In this section of the essay, I show that the three key elements in managing the Covid-19 pandemic —governmental policies, scientific knowledge, and media publicity — were all implemented in the name of Life.

The efforts to manage the Covid-19 pandemic were unprecedented in their

speed, duration, and extent. In response to the discovery of a contagious pneumonia-like illness of unknown origin in late December 2019, the city of Wuhan, China, is placed under quarantine. Within two weeks, a novel coronavirus is isolated, and its genomic sequence is publicly shared for scientific study and to spur the invention of a vaccine. Within a month, the WHO declares Covid-19 as a "public health emergency of international concern" (PHEIC) and the US declares a nation-wide public health emergency because a man in Washington state who had returned from Wuhan is found to be infected. By mid-February 2020, a "whole-of-UN response" to Covid-19 is initiated which is outlined in several documents including, *inter alia*, the WHO's "Strategic Preparedness and Response Plan" (SPRP), the UN "Global Humanitarian Response Plan" (GHRP), and the UNDP's "A UN framework for the immediate socio-economic response to Covid-19." By early March 2020, the WHO officially announces Covid-19 as a pandemic. This prompts the Inter Agency Standing Committee (IASC) created by the UN in 1991 to coordinate global humanitarian efforts, to activate "The Humanitarian System-wide Scale-Up Activation Protocol for the Control of Infectious Disease Events." By late March/early April, most of the world shuts down, reflecting "massive scale up of global magnitude [that] is required to respond to the immediate health needs resulting from the pandemic."[4] What took about three months to put in place lasted about three years —China lifted its zero-covid policy only in late 2022 and the US federal government extended the national level public health emergency until January 2023.

If the speed and duration of the Covid-19 pandemic management is noteworthy, its comprehensiveness is extraordinary. Never has the whole human species come within the purview of management. There are 193 countries in the world — excluding the Holy See and the stateless country of Palestine. According to incomplete records maintained by the International Center for Non-Profit Law, at least 112 countries officially declared a nationwide state of emergency, while even more — 153 countries — established partial measures that affected the ability of citizens to assemble.[5] Accordingly, almost 80 percent of all countries and far more than 80 percent of humans

have been subjected to some form of collective management including control over movement, speech, and medical procedures.

This is not to say that all people everywhere were subjected to the same policies or to the same degree. The extent to which humans were managed differed between countries and regions. Sweden and the US had less restrictive measures on population movements than China or Italy. Most countries sealed their borders to travelers and curtailed domestic travel to a minimum, many shut down schools and factories, and protocols of "social-distancing", "self-isolation", "shelter-in-place", masking, handwashing, and vaccine passports were variously specified, encouraged, and enforced. Whereas migrant workers in India were forced to walk hundreds of miles to reach home, "essential workers" in the US were pressed into service while the rest of the US working population became familiar with Zoom and other video conferencing platforms. For those who could afford them, the screen became a teaching device to millions of schoolchildren and a shopping portal for millions of house-bound consumers. Despite differences of degree in the application of these policies, the management of the Covid-19 pandemic revealed that humanity itself was manageable. This singular phenomenon is one enduring precipitate of the Covid-19 pandemic.

But more significant is the fact that the human species became a manageable entity in the name of Life. The preservation and prolongation of Life was the animating purpose of pandemic management — at the level of public policies, science, and media. Saving Life was the stated goal of the agencies involved in pandemic public policy — both governmental and non-government. A couple of examples should suffice. The strategic priorities of the GHRP include "decreasing the deterioration of human assets and rights, social cohesion and livelihoods" due to Covid-19.[6] What is true of international organizations is no less true of every country. As the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) of the USA says, it works "24/7 to protect America from health, safety, and security threats…[and] saves lives…"[7] Similarly, related public policies like "flattening the curve", "social distancing", and "self-isolating" were explicitly organized to save Lives.

Human life is the acknowledged object not only of governmental policies but also of the sciences involved in pandemic management. Virologists and

epidemiologists quickly established that Sars-cov-2 was novel, contagious, and lethal. A new virus is one to which humans have no immunity. A contagious virus infects many humans and a lethal one kills its host. None of these three characteristics is of great concern if they occur individually. Sars-cov-2 is considered deadly because it exhibits all three characteristics at once — new, highly contagious, and very lethal. Epidemiological data suggests about one in a thousand die from the flu each year, up to half a million annually world-wide. The early data from Wuhan, China estimated a fatality rate thirty-four times worse than the flu, suggesting that Sar-cov-2 would kill many millions world-wide.

This was an output of a scientific model of infectious disease dynamics, exemplified by the SEIRS model.[8] These models compartmentalize the human population of interest into the "Susceptible", "Exposed", "Infected", and "Recovered" groups and model the movement of individuals and groups through these compartments. Such models are just as applicable to humans as they are to cows —for instance, for modeling the effects of bovine foot and mouth disease— and are only as good as the assumptions used — of birth and death rates, of infectivity, of transmissibility, and so on.[9]

It was the prediction of half a million deaths in Britain by a highly regarded scientific team from Imperial College, London that spurred the lockdown there. A few weeks later a rival scientific model from Oxford predicted far fewer deaths. By assuming social distancing and recalibrating the model parameters, the original team reduced its own estimate of excess deaths from Covid-19 by 98 percent to about 10,000. Similarly, the lockdown policy in the US was justified by the results of a 2020 model by the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) based in Seattle Washington, suggested between 100 and 240 thousand Americans would die from the virus even with social distancing policies in place. Ten days later, on April 11 the revised IHME estimate of the same number was 61,000.

Much has been made of the unreliability of scientific models for management decisions. The wild swing in modeled estimates is used as proof that the output of scientific models should not be confused with evidence, much less used to shape policy.[10] Equally, much has been made about the gap between the political uses of "follow the Science" and real scientific work,

which is conducted methodically and slowly. Yet, such focus on the confusion between model and reality or indeed on that between fake and real science, overlooks the crucial phenomenon. Regardless of the representative accuracy or predictive success of scientific knowledge concerning the pandemic, disease dynamic models in particular, and epidemiological sciences in general, take Lives as the unit of analysis.

But more than public policy or epidemiological science, it is perhaps the media that offers the clearest evidence of the extent to which the human species has become a manageable entity in the name of Life. A virus cannot be seen, either by the naked eye or through an ordinary optical microscope. Except for those looking through an electron microscope, no one can see it. Yet almost all know what it looks like because we have been shown suitably doctored images of it. Even a seven-year-old child can now draw as a crowned circle the coronavirus he has been shown but cannot see. Seeing what they are shown is a training in how to see on command. Viewers of the coronavirus pandemic show have forgotten they never saw the virus or even an image of it. Mesmerized by the visualizations they watched, viewers confused reality TV for reality.

The production of the coronavirus pandemic show was a global affair. From Wuhan China to Seattle Washington, coronavirus was beamed to all corners of the earth. Glowing TV, computer, and phone screens announced its presence to billions. Sars-cov-2 had a retinue of courtiers and ministers that heralded its coming, tracked its movement, and attested to its power. Popular books by academics, films about global contagions, and TED talks by billionaire philanthropists had prepared the psychological soil to welcome the virus. Virologists and epidemiologists, public health officials and politicians, data analysts and statisticians produced the data stream of Lives: infected, recovered, dead. TV program producers, newscasters, and social media influencers packaged the data stream into viewable segments for what became the coronavirus pandemic show.

Global maps colored in shades of red marked the countries, cities, and towns in which the coronavirus had taken residence. The number of confirmed cases infected by coronavirus pulsed in threatening circles. Hotspots identified the cities where far too many suffered and died. Curves showed

the exponential speed with which the virus moves through the population, histograms tracked the daily number of deaths, and pie-charts displayed the proportion of the dead that was young or sick. Video clips of masked humans shuffling on empty streets reinforced the need to remain isolated. Death counters produced by reputable universities updated the body count of the infected and dead, amplifying the dread of its implacable power. TV clips of patients on ventilators and in unburied coffins confirmed the merciless tax exacted by coronavirus and its mutations. The coronavirus pandemic show made plain that Life was the object of its concern. Consider for example, the media success of Andrew Cuomo, the Governor of New York who held a much-admired daily press conference, which was carried nationally by all the news channels.[11] At the bottom of the TV screen in an endless moving scroll were the phrases: Stay Home. Stop the Virus. Save Lives.

Saving Lives was the overarching justification of the Covid-19 pandemic management program as reflected in each of its elements — whether public policy, science, or media.

Life is a Fetish

In this second section, I follow Illich's claim that Life is a fetish into the thicket of pandemic management. Life is not a scientific concept or idea though, like other "verbal amoebas." It carries many connotations. Life pretends to be a substantive, an entity, a thing — as for instance in such phrases as "a life," "human life," or "American lives." Yet, argued Illich, Life is a fictitious construct shaped by the techniques of management. Illich elsewhere noted that the images of the blue planet and the pink fetus serve as fetish objects of Life. However, in the specific case of the coronavirus pandemic, there is no image of Life. Instead, Death stalked the mediatized landscape in the form of the spiked coronavirus that even toddlers were taught to recognize. Frightened by this media show of Death, viewers clung ever closer to the non-thing called Life. Ellul's warnings about the humiliation of the word and the suffocating spread of images find resonance in Illich's caution against fabricated entities.

In his 1989 address to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Ivan

Illich argued that "Life" appears in ordinary speech and official discourse as a fictitious and factitious entity. References to "a life" among pro-lifers, to "American lives" in CDC or Department of Defense documents, or to "human life on earth" among ecologists, invoke "a new kind of social construct" that connotes "something precious, endangered, scarce [and] amenable to institutional management."[12] Life is "a management bred phantom" incapable of "denoting anything which we could ourselves taste, smell or experience." Illich's claim appears to be an exaggeration if not downright foolish. After all, the 21st century has been called the era of the biology — of clones, germline therapies, mRNA vaccines, and all the rest.[13]

Yet, it remains a paradoxical truth that there is no scientific definition of Life even though the so-called Life Sciences are flourishing. Already in 1983, Peter Medawar, Nobel Laureate in biology and considered the "father of transplantation" for his work on acquired immune tolerance, noted that "from a strictly scientific point of view, the concept of life makes no sense."[14] Nothing has changed in the intervening decades. The question "what is life" has found a home in the discipline of Astrobiology because it is concerned with understanding "how life began on Earth and to search for life elsewhere in the universe."[15] A leading group of astrobiologists recently confessed that "in spite of the spectacular developments in our understanding of the molecular basis that underlies biological phenomena, we still lack a generally agreed-upon definition of life, but this is not for want of trying."[16]

It is instructive to briefly review the reasons why the very scientists whose remit is to find Life do not know what they are looking for. Hundreds of working definitions of Life have been proposed though none has received wide-spread agreement. The reasons are three. The term Life is "defined using terms that are themselves undefined" such as complexity, information, and order.[17] To say that "Life is process that organizes matter to higher levels of complexity and maintains that complexity" is to say nothing, since complexity is undefined. The second reason Life remains undefined even as it is a profitable object of techno-science, is that "a combination of descriptions of life is called a definition." The distinction between the living and the non-living cannot be reduced to a single property. That is why virologists cannot say whether a virus is an animate or inanimate being. A virus does not reproduce but replicates on contact with a living cell. A virus

is not capable of auto-mobility but must be transported between living organisms by direct or indirect contact. Using such criteria as reproduction and locomotion to distinguish slugs from stones condemns the virus into a liminal zone. Scientists are stumped on how to classify the poliovirus which, if stored at minus 20 centigrade, can be kept in suspended animation — inert yet potent — indefinitely. The third reason why Life scientists do not have a definition of the thing they think they study is that they arbitrarily identify a specific step in the continuum from "complex chemical system to primitive living systems" as evidence of Life. But this simply begs the question, as is evident when asking that a definition of life should "should cover 'all forms of life *we know about*.'"[18]

The absence of a scientific definition of "life" only proves Illich's contention that "the notion of an entitative human life which can be professionally [managed] and legally protected has been tortuously constructed through a legal-medical-religious-scientific discourse…"[19] Accordingly, Life is a meaningless yet suggestive term— one of many "verbal amoebas" as Illich said. Life does not denote something specific or concrete. Life is not a palpable entity, though it appears as one in the language. To work 24/7 to 'save lives' as the CDC does, or to decrease the deterioration of 'human assets' as the Global Humanitarian Response Plan intends, is to both create and name a manageable social reality. As Illich notes, what can be done to "a life" would be unthinkable if it were done to "a person."

This fictitious substance called Life also functions as a religious fetish. A fetish is an object venerated for its salvific powers. We are used to fetishizing commodities and services because they are thought to bring happiness, health, and pleasure. But since Life captures existence itself, it becomes an encompassing fetish. Toilet paper was hoarded during the pandemic because it was vital to Life. Consumers were gouged for new commodities like plastic face shields because these protected Life. Old activities have gained new meaning — handwashing is 'life-enhancing', handshakes are 'life- threatening'. New activities such as being masked in public preserves Life while self-isolating is feared for possibly diminishing the 'quality of life.' When the doctor does triage in an emergency room or Covid-19 ward, she compares 'expected life years' to determine who is worth saving.

Illich once argued that images of the planet and the fetus functioned as sacred objects.[20] Such technogenic objects give visual shape to Life as worthy of veneration and reverence. There is no icon for Life as the object of coronavirus pandemic management. Instead, visualizations of the spiked coronavirus as the harbinger of Death — including constables wearing bright red corona helmets while beating up pedestrians in Delhi, India — spread far and wide to redouble the fetishized veneration of Life.

Life is a Technique

That Life cannot be confused with living — the activities and thoughts of people as they go about their days — is best explained by recalling what Michel Foucault documented almost forty years ago. Living became politicized in the 18th century when politics began to concern itself with both the health and welfare of the individual and the population. What the coronavirus introduced and made obvious for the first time is the worldwide capture of living by methods of management. Human activity and healthcare system capacities — beds, nurses, ventilators, or protective equipment — were jointly optimized as a problem in supply chain management. In describing this logic of pandemic management, I confirm Illich's prescience in noting that what Ellul called the technological system could generate a new human condition. The global management of Covid-19 revealed Life is a technique within the technological system and one that will take great effort to resist.

When Michel Foucault gave his annual lecture in 1978, he made a remarkable claim:

> The Church is a religion that lays claim to the daily government of men in their real life on the grounds of their salvation and on the scale of humanity, and we have no other example of this in the history of societies. With this institutionalization of a religion as a Church…an apparatus was formed of a kind of power not found anywhere else and [this] …pastoral power, in its typology, organization, and mode of functioning, pastoral power exercised as power, is doubtless something from which we have still not freed ourselves.[21]

Foucault argued the church is a unique institution for three reasons: it is organized to take hold of every aspect of quotidian life; and does so, in principle, for all humanity. There is no historical precedent for this comprehensive aim. Moreover, the Church is also unique for its manner of "conducting, directing, leading …taking charge of men collectively and individually throughout their life." The Church undertakes its mission of universal salvation as a pastorate, that is on the model of a shepherd's care of his flock. The pastoral style of governing souls is distinct from that of politics, child-rearing, or rhetoric, each of which, in different ways, seeks to shape and influence individuals. In contrast, says Foucault, the logic of pastoral caretaking infuses the Western Catholic church from "top to bottom": in its distribution of authority, the specification of tasks, and organization of offices. It is not only the whole flock but every single sheep that falls within the ambit of pastoral caretaking.

Foucault further argued that the logic of pastoral care found expression in the secular mentality of government from the 18th century. Biopolitics was the name that Foucault gave to this mode of government, which takes for its object the life of all and of each (omnes et singulatim), of the collective and the individual. He contrasted the logic of sovereignty against that of biopolitics. The former was rooted in the splendor and grandeur of sovereign power expressed most vividly in the act of putting to death. The right to seize, whether "things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself", characterized the sovereign power over life and death. In contrast, biopower is concerned with fostering life, "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put this life in order", where 'life' refers to both the large and small scale, both the population and the person.[22]

The transformation in the logic of Western political power from the "right to take life or let live" to "a power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death"[23] carries a few consequences pertinent to the distinction between Life and living. First, the rise of biopolitics before biology, wherein its meaning remains elusive, shows that Life is essentially a political notion. Second, the rise of biopolitics as the logic of politics marks the moment when living begins to be captured by Life — understood as the

spectral substance of political programs to manage individuals and collectives. Foucault described the detailed, fussy, and meticulous techniques of public health surveillance prescribed at the end of the seventeenth century to combat a plague. Quarantines, contact tracing, self-isolation, immunity passports — none of these are anything but 21st century avatars of the three-hundred-year-old logic of biopolitics, a politics geared to administering and fostering lives. Third, biopolitics is the historical matrix from which such contemporary political efforts as the management of Covid-19 takes place. In political ambition if not in fact, all the peoples of the world are subjected to public health management as is every individual. Both the population and the person constitute the target of governmental programs that foster life. Fourth and most disquieting, Life pretends to be identical to living —the innumerable and varied activities and thoughts of men and women. It is only by confusing the two that those who are the objects of management, clamor for their distinction.

Life does not refer to concrete persons — Mary or Joe — but to an amorphous aggregate of biological entities, only accidentally with a human form (recall, even bison and cows can be instances of 'lives saved'). Joe gets sentimentally attached to saving Life because the term conjures up a vague image of his friend Mary. Joe confusedly glides over the chasm that separates Mary from 'a life'. He feels that by participating in the program to save Lives he is saving Mary and himself. He makes the switch between being Joe and being 'a life' without noticing the change. Joe switches between being himself and seeing himself as an epidemiologist, bureaucrat, or news anchor would. By managing himself and Mary as they would, he is transmogrified into a statistical instance of Life.[24]

To fully appreciate the disjuncture between living and Life and the confusion into which Joe is invited to fall, consider the effort to "flatten the curve" a staple of pandemic management. Flattening the curve is the popular way to explain the mechanics of managing death by Sars-cov-2. A curve shows the expected number of infected humans over a period. By instituting such behavioral controls as "handwashing, teleworking, limiting large gatherings…", the cases can be kept at or below the healthcare "system capacity", which includes nurses, doctors, ICUs, ventilators, and the like. Calibrating the number of expected deaths by available hospital resources is an exercise in supply chain management, well known to industrial engineers. Just as the number of shoes manufactured can be calibrated by the amount of leather available, so also the number of Covid-19 cases can be restricted by the available hospital beds and medical personnel. It was this style of just-in-time management that previously gutted the facilities so much that it caused New York hospitals to be almost overwhelmed by sick patients during the flu season of 2018. Then, excess capacity was reduced. This time, excess infections were flattened.

This technique to manage the supply chain of human populations in and out of infection was best explained by the Governor of California, Gavin Newsom. Mr. Newsom warned that ending the lockdown was not like turning on and off a light switch. That is because death rates would have soared if all restrictions were lifted at one fell swoop. Instead, the only way out of a lockdown was to manage it as one would "operate a dimmer." He intended "to toggle that dimmer, so that we get exactly the appropriate lighting, so that we can transition to herd immunity and that vaccine." During a storm, engineers regulate the flow of water from a dam so it does not breach the banks of a river. Newsom wanted to control the flow of humans in and out of their houses so that the resulting illnesses and deaths would not breach the medical systems capacity. Like a good scientist, he promised to take an experimental approach to solving the problem. He would try lifting a restrictive measure, say opening businesses on Sundays only. He would then check the infection rates. If they were too high, he would reimpose that restriction and try easing another, say reopening high schools. If the resulting death rates were still unacceptable, he'd loosen constraints like increasing the number of ICU beds and ventilators. If the death rates were now less than available capacities, he would cut back on medical personnel or protective gear to save money.

Millions of people adapted themselves to this program. They reconfigured their residence into a fortress against viral invaders in whatever form, replete with portholes to receive inputs and expel outputs. Money came into online bank accounts for those still receiving an income, even if only to meet on screen. Nutrients were ordered online, prepared with minimal human contact, and left at the doorstep. Entertainment was piped in through cable wires while excrement was piped out through sewers. Muscles not needed

for work or play were toned indoors on fossil fueled machines. With its inhabitants on such life-support systems, the house functioned as an ICU for the healthy. In the age of logistics, saving Lives is a management program that jointly optimizes both human and technical resources.

Flattening the curve by fitting humans into the available healthcare capacity reinforces the illusion that living is a scarce resource, maintained by machines, and metered out by professionals. Millions of men and women all over the world accepted, and even actively demanded, to live as statistical instances of Life. Accepting Life as coextensive with living entails accepting the illusion that living and dying are manageable objects. It is only when living is thought to be Life that dying becomes the consequence of administrative incompetence. Little wonder that questioning the protocols of pandemic management was, for many people, tantamount to promoting death. Life elicits sentimental attachment only from those blind to the distinction between concrete persons and what the UN calls 'human assets.'

The methods involved in flattening the curve make visible what Illich presciently argued forty years ago. He then wrote that "only within the matrix which Jacques Ellul calls 'the technological system' has this new type of human condition come to full fruition."[25] According to Ellul, the technological system constitutes a self-augmenting ensemble of techniques that is tightly coordinated. In the technological system, not only do technical artifacts constitute the environment of living, but living is shaped within their ambit.[26] The new human condition of which Illich spoke is not simply the thoroughgoing embeddedness of humanity in technique. Rather, it refers primarily to the growing incapacity of men and women to see the difference between living and Life. A telling detail from the archives of pandemic management offers a clue of how deep this blindness goes. Sanjay Gupta, the doctor on call to CNN, sought the counsel of an astronaut, Scott Kelly, on how to deal with the physical and psychological effects of pandemic management. It is not without interest that a man who spent time in a man-made shell in outer space should be the one called on to give advice on living in the time of pandemic.[27]

Notes

1 Some sections of this paper were previously published in Sajay Samuel, "On Corona Days," *The International Journal of Illich Studies* 7, no. 1 (2020): 70–98.

2 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2021), 314. I strongly recommend this book and above all chapter 11, titled "To hell with Life" which traverses similar territory as this paper.

3 Ivan Illich, "The institutional construction of a new fetish: Human Life," in *In the Mirrors of the Past: Lectures and Addresses,* 1978-1990 (London: Marion Boyars, 1992), 226.

4 https://interagencystandingcommittee.org/system/files/2020-11/IASC%20System-Wide%20Scale-Up%20Protocols%20-%20Adapted%20to%20Respond%20to%20the%20COVID-19%20Pandemic_0.pdf, accessed Feb 15, 2023.

5 https://www.icnl.org/covid19tracker/?location=&issue=5&date=&type=, accessed Feb 15, 2023.

6 https://www.unocha.org/sites/unocha/files/Global-Humanitarian-Response-Plan-COVID-19.pdf, accessed Feb 15, 2023.

7 https://www.cdc.gov/about/organization/mission.htm, accessed Feb 15, 2023

8 https://www.nature.com/articles/s41592-020-0856-2, accessed Feb 15, 2023.

9 John Ioannidis, "A fiasco in the making? As the coronavirus takes hold, we are making decisions without reliable data," *STAT*, 17, March 2020. John Lee, "How to understand — and report — figures for 'Covid deaths'," The Spectator, March 29, 2020. See also by the same author, "How deadly is the coronavirus: It's still far from clear," *The Spectator*, March 28, 2020.

10 To gauge the extent of disagreement among scientists about the public policy on Covid-19, consult the many video interviews of 'dissident' scientists conducted by Freddie Sayers of UnHerd.com For the slow rate of scientific consensus relative to public policy, also consult, Perspectives on the Pandemic II: A conversation with Dr. Knut Wittkowski, former chief biostatistician and epidemiologist at Rockefeller University Hospital, New York https://ratical.org/PerspectivesOnPandemic-II.html accessed on April 15, 2020. Comments by Dr. Sucharit Bhakdi, former director of Institute for Medical Microbiology at the Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany who claims the lockdown is 'grotesque, absurd, and very dangerous.' https://hitchensblog.mailonsunday.co.uk/2020/03/an-expert-says-the-current-response- to-the-coronavirus-is-grotesque-absurd-and-very-dangerous.html, accessed April 5, 2020. Interview with Prof. Johan Giesecke, advisor to the Swedish government and Chief scientist for the European Centre for Disease prevention and control. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bfN2JWifLCY&feature=youtu.be accessed April 22, 2020.

11 Through much of April and May 2020, Andrew Cuomo was the favored politician on matters Covid-19.

12 Ivan Illich, "The institutional construction of a new fetish: Human Life," in *In the Mir-*

rors of the Past: Lectures and Addresses, 1978-1990 (London: Marion Boyars, 1992), 218-9 and *passim*.

13 https://www.oecd.org/sti/emerging-tech/A%20Glover.pdf, accessed Feb 15, 2023

14 Peter and Jean Medawar, A*ristotle to Zoos: A Philosophical Dictionary of Biology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 66-7.

15 Serhiy Tsokolov, "Why is the definition of life so Elusive? Epistemological considerations," *Astrobiology* 9, no. 4 (2009): 401.

16 Stephane Tirard, Michel Morange, Antonio Lazcano, "The Definition of Life: a brief history of an elusive scientific endeavor," *Astrobiology* 10, no. 10 (2010): 1003.

17 Tsokolov, "Why is the definition of life so Elusive?," 402-5.

18 Tsokolov, 410.

19 Illich, "The institutional construction," 226.

20 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, (Toronto: Anansi Press, 1992), 263-4.

21 Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, and Population* (Stuttgart: MacMillian, 2007), 148 and *passim*.

22 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality,* vol.1, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 135-45.

23 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 138.

24 I do not here elaborate the mode of management for individuals and populations which was not discussed by Foucault. Much of the pandemic management was outsourced to individuals who internalized population level statistics and managed themselves in terms of risk.

25 Illich, "The institutional construction," 224.

26 Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, (London: Continuum Books, 1980).

27 Time did not permit a more detailed engagement in this paper with not only Ellul's own work (*Propaganda, The Subversion of Christianity, The Humiliation of the Word* among others), but also the many connections between Ellul and Illich. In that regard, I think the pandemic offers an exemplary instance to more fully explore Illich's description of Ellul's work, which is also a self-description. "[Ellul] leads the believer to deepen his Biblical faith and eschatological hope in the face of two uncomfortable and disturbing truths… [that of the uniqueness of] modern technique and its malevolent consequences, [and that this is the result of the] subversion of the Gospel — its transformation into an ideology called Christianity" Ivan Illich, "An address to 'Master Jacques'," *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 14, no. 2 (1994): 65-68.

Prophets of Zoom? Jacques Ellul, Sherry Turkle, Simone Weil, and Online Community

Matthew Prior

What might reading Jacques Ellul contribute to the questions about the gifts and limits of online life that were put into sharp relief by the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic? Of course, online communities have existed for many years, dating to the earliest forms of computer technology.[1] And yet the pandemic was a time in which increasing numbers, if far from all, experimented, at times freely, at times out of necessity, with various forms of online life. In my case, this also included 'online church,' in which I participated both as leader and participant.

To give a brief background to the theological mode of my reflection here, I write as an ordained minister in the Church of England, engaged in local church ministry, but also in the ministerial formation of people undertaking theological study at St Mellitus College in West London. I hope that this primarily ecclesial setting will enrich rather than limit what I offer here, for I seek to emulate Ellul's mode of engaging sociology and theology, each informing the other. In short, I will argue that we can helpfully retrieve key insights from Ellul's account of technique and of church to point out the potential impoverishment of embodied presence that is inevitably entailed by the online community. At the same time, through Ellul but beyond him and drawing on other influences, I will attempt to discern some signs of hope for online life together when we become aware of these challenges and train ourselves in new patterns of attention, geared towards constructive engagement in narrowcasting platforms such as Zoom. My teasing title is *Prophets of Zoom? Jacques Ellul, Sherry Turkle, Simone Weil*

"Prophets of Zoom? Jacques Ellul, Sherry Turkle, Simone Weil, and Online Community." *Ellul Forum* 71 (Spring 2023): 25–44.

and Online Community, which hints at my key influences. But by prophecy I do not mean the popular and simplistic sense of condemning a flight to the virtual world (hinted at by the rhyme with doom!), but rather prophecy in the sense of bringing an important, neglected and inconvenient truth rooted in a true story about the world.

Reading Ellul on Technique/Technology, Work and Sabbath

I will begin with an opening assessment of Ellul's prescient account of technique/technology before turning briefly to his - perhaps incomplete - accounts of Sabbath and church. Here I briefly recapitulate my doctoral thesis, published in March 2020 as *Confronting Technology: The Theology of Jacques Ellul*. March 2020 was the month of the first lockdowns due to Covid-19 around the world and the thoughts of many turned more, I suspect, to conferencing technology than to confronting technology! As the pandemic unfolded, I considered the possibility that my work might have become dated before it was even in print. And yet, as I have reflected further on the monumental work of Jacques Ellul, I have a renewed confidence in his enduring importance.

On my reading, Ellul's sociological engagement with the phenomenon he called technique is rooted in an overarching theological project. Ellul posits technique as a way of attending to everything, a metaphysic if you like, and his concern with particular technical means and objects is located within this bigger picture he is painting.[2] With my students I argue we could see individual technologies as 'hardware' and technique as the intellectual 'software' that makes them possible.[3] Moreover, I suggest that without the theological horizon, 'Ellul's technology criticism is a dangerous dead end, devoid of hope'.[4] I came to see after my first few years of research that in the name of Ellul's own commitment to a Christian realism,[5] I needed a much more open mind about new technologies so as not to dismiss them out of hand. This openness required Ellul's dialectical theology of hope.[6]

My constructive reading of Ellul's hope is that he calls on us to desacralize technologies, that is to take them apart, break them down and reduce them to being purely useful, refusing to allow them to enchant us or fascinate us by their innovation, their newness and the apparently seamless virtual world they induct us into.[7] This insight on the fascinating, enchanting power of new technologies is, of course, hardly unique to Ellul and it has long been grounded in sober sociological and psychological research. As the seasoned MIT analyst of technology and culture, Sherry Turkle, argues in her 2015 book, *Reclaiming Conversation: the Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, 'Technology enchants – it makes us forget what we know about life'.[8] Following Ellul, we might add that technology can also make us forget what we may know about the God revealed in Jesus Christ: 'God became incarnate: it is not our job to disincarnate him'[9]

In a later work, Ellul explicitly calls us to 'use technologies' for God's glory rather than to 'enjoy them', in the sense of refusing to make them objects of love, and here I suspect he is dependent upon St. Augustine for the use/enjoy distinction.[10] This is another way of saying that we are to reduce technologies to the status of means and deny them final significance, and in so doing, to take the potential for idolatry out of them, releasing them to serve our works of love.

Despite this basic agreement, I would have liked Ellul to say more clearly that technological work can in fact be done for the glory of God, just as other kinds of work can be. In my research I argued for a deficit in Ellul's reading of the Sabbath command. Our work, even technological work, receives both its impetus, as well as the contemplation of its meaning, from the time we rest from working. So, Sabbath isn't just about ceasing from work, as Ellul seems to say of Sabbath when he speaks of it as release from the necessity of work, *it's also about contemplating the things we have made in our work and consciously bringing them to God*. [11] When we stop work to worship, we are saying that we worship God, not our work, for only God, not our work, can redeem us. Yet we are also saying by this act that our work itself is meant to be fitting act of worship to God. [12] Indeed, if we reflect briefly upon the harvest liturgies of Ancient Israel as e.g. recorded in Deuteronomy 26, the act of gathering to worship signalled a moment for workers to bring the products of their labour into God's presence. Traditionally, that's what the offertory liturgy in early Christian worship reflected, the act of our returning to God in gratitude the products of our work-as-worship (although the closest we come to emulating this now is in creative harvest liturgies). If we see the act of gathering as a liturgical rhythm of bringing

our work to God in worship, maybe there is something especially fitting about Christians whose work and experience has been in the technology industry helping our churches to worship online? Perhaps then we can go as far as to suggest that technologies can in fact facilitate true worship rather than simply being kept at arm's length from it.

So much for Sabbath. In my research I argued too that the Ellulian task of desacralizing technologies can be seen as an anticipation of God's final work of reconciling all things to Himself, even things undertaken for dubious motives or in opposition to this reconciling vision.[13] In other words, desacralisation is not simply about judging, but also about anticipating the reconciling act of God now, whilst at the same time acknowledging that both judging and reconciling are God's prerogatives in the final account.[14] This more constructive line of thinking finds parallels in a range of contemporary Christian perspectives on technologies from the critical tone of the technologist turned theologian, Michael Burdett, to the more obviously technophile, Roman Catholic ethicist Kate Ott, who writes interestingly of 'ethical hacking' of existing digital technologies, that is, repurposing them for good, in the way that the prophetic literature envisages swords being beaten into ploughshares.[15] In other words, at least on my proposed reading, Ellul is nothing if not profoundly hopeful, even if he is deeply opposed to a vision of the future as merely the product of our technological innovation. The future Ellul proposes is a future coming towards us from God, by which we are freed from the illusion of total control and the anxiety it induces.[16] From this cosmic frame we now turn to the difference this vision makes to everyday life, particularly as it relates to church.

Reading Ellul on the Church

As I argued in my research, Ellul is elusive when it comes to the question of what difference church makes to everyday life, in other words, its morally formative effect. The fact that he never devoted a single text to the subject in an abundant theological corpus speaks eloquently about his reserve. The problem is well expressed in Greenman et al.'s excellent study: 'Readers of Ellul who are inspired by his vision of Christian freedom will need to supplement his writings with resources related to spiritual and moral formation if they are to exercise faithful presence in the modern world'.[17]

Ellul cautions against the easy acceptance of the institutional church as the Body of Christ, an ongoing form of the incarnation, arguing instead for the importance of individual decision and discipleship, leading to embodied public witness to Jesus Christ.[18] The dominant genre of his more occasional writing on the church in especially *La Parole Humiliée* (*The Humiliation of the Word*) and *La Subversion du Christianisme* but also to a lesser extent *Les Nouveaux Possédés* and *Sans Feu ni Lieu* is 'negative theology'. That is to say that Ellul is apt to point out where the church has not been what it is meant to be, where it has betrayed the revelation of God's grace, a grace which nevertheless continues its work in the world, often despite the church! It seems likely that Kierkegaard is a significant influence here and indeed, one is tempted to say of Ellul what the 'Lutheran Anglican' theologian Paul Zahl says about his own approach: 'The theologian of grace has no ecclesiology.'[19]

Ellul's critique becomes even more sharply challenging to enthusiasts for technological forms of Christian community. Ellul's constant refrain in *Parole* is to show how the church has historically sought to project its own power through images. He charts this through the medieval period and argues that 'the audio-visual church', as he put it, had taken this to new lengths. Why? For the same reasons as in any age, to cover up its own sense of the weakness and poverty of its life and gathering, a poverty in which God may choose to dwell and to work if only we would allow God to do so.[20] Although I would argue that Ellul's account of power is too limited, too conditioned perhaps by the abuses of state power which formed the backdrop against which he wrote,[21] he does recall us to the beauty and frailty of inter-personal witness and encounter.[22] For Ellul, we might say church is nothing if not the embodied word and the practice of encounter, in all its apparent fragility, for only then are we dependent upon the uniting work of God's Spirit.[23]

At the same time, to have no theory of church does not imply having no practice of the church! And Jacques Ellul had a longstanding, protesting practice of church: a practice of gathering in homes, small groups and community settings, a practice to which he committed in service and hospital-

ity as well as in speaking and preaching.[24] This suggests too that he had a practice of counter-formation to the dominant culture, even if he doesn't articulate anything like the sophisticated 'ecclesial ethics' we find in the work of recent Christian ethicists protesting modernity.[25]

Incarnation and Online Community

After this preliminary overview of my reading on Ellul on technology and church, it is time to turn to some more concrete reflections on our recent moment. Ellul demonstrates his concern for the concrete by the regular use of cultural references and examples (if not fully fledged case studies) in his best theological writings, most notably for this conversation in *The Humiliation of the Word*. This 'incarnation principle' is indeed what funds all his sociological and historical explorations, on my account.

So, as promised, let's briefly focus on a specific practice and a specific technology. To flesh out this reflection I'd like to focus on the narrowcasting platform Zoom and in particular the way that it has been used to facilitate online communities, although I will also discuss in an aside the popular broadcast platform, YouTube.

The first thing to note in this connection is the conversations I have encountered about the potential for these technologies to facilitate new communities are generally hopeful. And there have been moments when I, quite frankly, have shared that hope. I, like many other initial skeptics, have been won over to the benefits of digital interaction, especially in my teaching practice. Moreover, churches like my own experienced a huge rise in our 'digital footprint' during the first lockdown. *The Alpha Course*, a popular form of catechesis which has had a significant impact in enabling the exploration of Christian faith by millions of people in the UK and beyond has proved to be very popular online, to the degree that even its founder has changed his mind about Alpha's central practices of eating and talking together in person.[26] The Church of England has trumpeted the fact that its Daily Prayer podcast has reached up to one million people in the aftermath of the pandemic.[27] The internationally renowned theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams was heartened by the rising interest in prayer.[28] All in all, there is little benefit in denying that the

numbers engaging in acts of online Christian prayer and worship certainly increased during the pandemic.

What caused this rise? Clearly, a combination of boredom and curiosity was a factor in people deciding to engage in online church, just as in online exercise classes or online cookery![29] Others have written about the fear and anxiety generated by the moment leading people to ask deeper, spiritual questions. More speculatively, I have even heard technophile theologians speak of a correlation between the trans-physicality of online platforms like Zoom and the desire to escape the bounds of the present body 'in order to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling', in the words of St Paul (2 Cor. 5:4), or the way it might help us reflect upon how the Holy Spirit works across time and space to knit together online congregants.

My Ellulian concern however is with the diminishment of present embodiment rather than any potential for a foretaste of the embodiment that Christians believe is promised in the new creation.[30] Indeed, the question that I and many others find pertinent here is this: what embodied formation, moral and spiritual if you like, can take place in forms of online community and church, supported by platforms such as Zoom? What are the specific affordances and losses of the technologies? I want to look at these questions briefly through the lens of two important themes, *presence* and *attention*.

Presence

Theological reflection on online presence snags over the question of embodiment. And yet some argue that the online world is just as embodied as the offline world. Why? Because it involves offline bodies looking at physical screens, watching offline people move in physical spaces, and most importantly for churches, especially if the whole interaction is undertaken out of desire for God, having real-world effects in our spiritual lives. In this sense, so it is argued, online presence must surely be considered just as 'real' and embodied as the offline world, since if it were not so, it would suggest that it was a domain outside of God's purview. As Pete Phillips, an influential and enthusiastic voice in the UK debate, 'God inhabits the digital.'[31]

Others with more reason to be cautious about affirming the value of online presence, such as the moral theologian Sam Wells, formerly Dean of Duke University, cautiously reject an easy equation between online and offline presence, but still wish to argue for a qualitatively different kind of digital presence or 'being with', as Wells characteristically calls it. [32] I follow Wells in arguing baldly that *online presence is not in-person presence, nor is it an improvement upon in-person presence.* This is not to deny that online church does have positive formative effects that, all things considered, are far richer than simple absence or what analogue technologies could provide. Nor is it indeed to deny online presence has been a means of including many who had been neglected by faith communities, namely the housebound and those with physical disabilities.[33] And nor would we regret the fact that in many cases the reduction of travel to and from physical locations has had ecological benefits.[34] But online presence, despite attempts to argue the contrary, is not a fully embodied, interpersonal activity.

Indeed, a body of literature in the field of inter-personality notes the evident loss of spatial dimension, posture and the pragmatics of speech (such as gesture, bodily movement and 'catching the eye') in online community. Taken together, these losses could entail that online engagement risks turning others into objects, a mere backdrop, as it were, for our own self-awareness, in such a way that we are not sufficiently de-centred in our encounter with others, and with God.[35] The internationally renowned Biblical scholar Bishop Tom Wright expressed such a concern in the early days of the pandemic, construing online church in terms of a Platonizing tendency:

> In those countries such as my own where churches, and other places of worship ... have shut for perfectly comprehensible reasons there is a danger of accidentally sending the wrong signal to the wider world… We may seem to be agreeing that really we are just a group of like-minded individuals pursuing our own rather arcane private hobby. The danger with E.Worship is it can turn into P.worship: the Platonic vision of the "flight of the alone to the alone".[36]

In a fascinating book entitled *Holy Communion in Contagious Times*, another British Biblical scholar, Richard Burridge, who has pioneered a liturgy

for Zoom Eucharists, clearly saw the need to defend his practice against just this kind of critique. He cites as a representative example the liturgist Paul Roberts:

> There is a big financial prize if the distinction between 'real' and 'virtual' is abolished. . . It is essential that the Church clearly understands what is real and the importance of physical presence, which lies at the heart of creation, justice, who we are, and who God is.[37]

The suggestion from both Wright and Roberts is that public gathered worship inevitably leads to public responsibility and action, in a way that privatised online community may not. Indeed, Robert's point about creation and justice echoes a long-standing critique of the threat posed by the evasion of the physical world and the neighbour facilitated by technological means, a threat that does appear poised to escalate.[38] On this account, online presence presents us with new possibilities for anonymity, for evading one another, new ways of barely attending when we are technically present (and I mean 'technically' here in the fullest sense of the word – *cameras off*!).

I will return to this below with the question of attention, but I turn here briefly to a story I gleaned from the first part of Barack Obama's memoir, *A Promised Land*, pertinent to questions of creation care and neighbour love. President Obama relates how, in 2010, in a last-ditch attempt to get an agreement at the Copenhagen climate summit, he literally had to chase the heads of the state of the five so-called BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) around a dingy conference centre in order to meet with them in person both to beg and badger them into agreeing to stricter targets on carbon emissions. His five-page account of this event is enough to convince me that had the conference been on Zoom, this meeting might never have happened or if it had, it might not have turned out as it did, and our climate would have been even poorer than it is. [39]

At the same time, there is a body of literature, as well as the testimony of lived experience, that contends that online interaction can sometimes lead to greater honesty than in-person engagement, if it produces the well documented 'online disinhibition effect' whereby people step across bound-

aries and speak more frankly when in their own space than if they were in shared physical space.[40] The fact that people spoke more freely online than in person was one of the factors behind Gumbel's enthusiasm for online Alpha noted in *The Financial Times* article cited above. Again, anecdotally, a trusted colleague of mine expressed the view that the Zoom worship and gatherings of our intercultural community of several hundred gave greater visibility to the people of colour in our midst, when compared with our in-person gatherings.

No matter the value of these observations, disinhibition in itself is ambivalent as regards conflict and indeed may well escalate it. In connection with dispersed social media communities, the disinhibition effect has been documented as producing many social harms.[41] However, as a counter-argument to the disinhibition thesis, and in relation to families and closer knit communities, Sherry Turkle argues that the kind of self-knowledge and empathy you need genuinely to resolve conflict is only gained through in-person conversation, the kind often evaded through exporting conflict onto less confronting platforms. The claim here is not that in-person community is richer because we feel better for being together, but that it is essential precisely because it is more confronting. [42]

And yet, by refusing to equate online presence with physical presence, I do not mean to say that online presence is of little to no value. I merely intend to show in what ways online presence is a qualified form of presence. But presence is not the only thing that gets qualified in Zoom. There is also the question of our attention online.

Attention

We all know that physical presence needs attention to be valuable – the back row in most lecture rooms can tell us that! And because online presence is different from physical presence, the question of our attention becomes only more acute. By 'attention' I mean a number of things: first, our ability to look at, listen to and *wait for* one another. But more specifically, I refer to our ability to wait for what a difficult poem, or a carefully spoken liturgy or a challenging exchange of views may be giving us.

Ellul critiques certain kinds of attention in his phenomenologically rich opening chapter of *The Humiliation of the Word*, contrasting hearing and seeing. Building on that, my understanding of attention has been greatly enriched by a seminal and rightly celebrated article by Simone Weil in which she argues that, at its root, attention is our ability to wait on God.[43] This means for her, any other act of paying attention - studying the finer points of Latin grammar, battling with a difficult math problem - all this can potentially help us to learn the kind of patient and relaxed attentiveness we need if we are going to learn to wait on God in mindful prayer. Moreover, just as importantly, all such acts shape how we will next attend to another person who needs us:

> If, however, we consider the occupations in themselves, studies are nearer to God because of the attention which is their soul. Whoever goes through years of study without developing this attention within himself has lost a great treasure. Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance; the love of our neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance.[44]

We could substitute for Latin the learning of any complex discipline. And we might indeed add to Weil's bookish focus other skills: learning to write computer code or doing careful manual labour (an activity Weil explicitly excludes) or undertaking close biochemical research that might lead to the creation of new vaccines. All such acts of attentiveness *can* potentially form us to become people who are able to love God and love our neighbours, offline and online.[45]

It is possible to be attentive both to one another and to a given subject matter when engaging in online learning and community. But it would be naïve, as Turkle has effectively contended, to deny that it's harder to give this kind of attention, this kind of sympathetic engagement, in the online space than it is in person. As Turkle and many others more recently have demonstrated, for much of the time in the online world our attention is a marketable commodity and there are competing forces at work pulling it in one direction or another, encouraging us to form now discredited habits of 'multitasking' and 'continuous partial attention.'[46]

Perhaps above all, what the market most needs is our permanently scattered attention, attention ready to be directed this way and that. As one recent assessment from two Christian ethicists trenchantly puts it:

> We live and move and have our being, not just, as Christians believe before the gaze of a faithful, loving God but under the invasive eyes of what the "big other", a growing number of data-hungry technology companies that feed off our thoughts, emotions and everyday lives in nefarious ways, while giving us free services in return.[47]

There is carefully compiled, non-alarmist evidence that online life, for all its undoubted affordances, does pose these kinds of challenges to our attention, challenges which can be great commercial opportunities for some of the most powerful actors on the planet. Online attention is not only qualified by the bombardment of information to which it is subjected in the online space, it also lives under the constant pressure of the 'attention economy'.

Uni-tasking, Narrowcasting and the Counter-practice of Physical Gathering

Given these realities, I propose that fruitful forms of online community will require at least three forms of attention training. Firstly, they will require the cultivation of disciplines and habits that consciously shape how we listen and how we look in the online space. As psychologists such as Turkle and popular writers such as Nicholas Carr have pointed out, these are habits we are forming *all the time*, and not just habits we can click on when we click on a Zoom link. When one recent study notes that the average American checks their iPhone 2,616 times a day, it is absurdly naïve to claim that our brains are able to easily switch from our new default of continuous partial attention.[48] And as noted above, we need to become aware of the distorting effect of seeing others as mere backdrop, alive to the loss of the cues which enable us to enjoy being together, and aware of the challenges of our own scattered attention. How, for example, can we make 'uni-tasking,' focussing on one thing at a time, a post-pandemic habit?

Secondly, and perhaps more promisingly, we will require an ethos of maximal live interactivity and participation. And this is where the 'narrowcasting' of Zoom holds considerably more promise than broadcasting platforms used by churches and other groups during the pandemic (and beyond), such as YouTube. In its demand that there be simultaneous and synchronous live presence, Zoom offers an online taste of those mixed blessings of being in community: interruptions, mistakes, even distractions in the sense of distractions from within the community itself, rather than from outside it. Whether that's people not muting themselves leading to unfortunate hot-mic comments, inappropriately dressed participants, glimpses of cats and dogs wandering around or the ever-present, sometimes deeply illuminating and sometimes deeply irritating chat!

In this respect, Zoom offers a far richer context for interaction than platforms that too easily enable what media analysts call 'context collapse.' As Christian ethicist Brent Laytham argues in his book *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment*, the guiding imperative of longer video platforms such as YouTube is to 'broadcast yourself.' This, he contends, inevitably leads us to construct ourselves for a virtual audience without a context, an audience of who knows where, who knows when, who knows why.[49]

Why does this matter? Because, although it can facilitate some remarkable content, the overriding purpose of YouTube is entertainment, not community. Now there's nothing wrong with entertainment, theologically speaking – after all, play can be a response to the fact that God holds the world in His hands, meaning that we don't have to, an important insight at a time of global crisis. We don't need to take ourselves too seriously and at their best, laughter and fun are signs of that, indeed signs of resurrection hope for Christians. Entertainment and fun rightly belong in any service of worship or community event, whether online or in person. And pragmatically, churches, including my own, have used YouTube endlessly because of its convenience and global reach.

However, it would be naïve to believe that once a demand for almost constant entertainment is normalised in a competitive market, sometimes referred to as 'seamless content', we can simply escape the demands that a

given medium imposes upon us. After all, not all of life is entertainment, something we often intuit as the woes of the world are filtered through the entertainment paradigm of the news broadcast.[50]

Moreover, as Laytham puts it, the need to compete in an entertainment saturated world inevitably imposes upon those broadcasting themselves a heightened reflexivity, a heightened awareness of the need to manage others' perceptions of us and to curate an appealing identity. All this is done outside of the context of embodied community which is where Christian character formation happens best. In other words, though preachers have always had to perform, in embodied community we have more to go on to assess whether their performance is fleshed out or just flashy.

Laytham contrasts the language of 'going viral' with the call of Christian communities to 'become virtuous', to form communities of character. We may disagree with Laytham or push back about the opportunities for forming people positively through video platforms, as I would want to, but it is hard to argue that the reflexive entertainment ecology of YouTube leads to the practice of curating 'authenticity' and identity, with often increasingly entertaining content required to grab attention. Churches are already regrettably all too easily caught up in a competitive religious market and the online space hardly breaks that mould. Whether Laytham exaggerates his case about YouTube, at least we can see that the Zoom retains the temporal realities of presence and interaction, even if it inevitably loses the significance of shared place.

Thirdly, and in this connection, I contend that to be communities in any real sense, online communities require some practice of physical gathering - both temporal and spatial - as a countercultural 'focal practice,' not neglecting to meet in person, a practice to be held in dialectical tension with online gathering.[51] In short, while I accept there are new possibilities for meaningful online interaction when undertaken with intentionality, can a community really be said to exist if there has never been and will never be a physical gathering?[52]

Conclusion

Though at times I may have sounded a more hopeful note about online church than Ellul's suspicious approach to the image-based church forty years ago, I have found in his work the confidence to mount a robust defence of in-person physical gathering, both rooted in his general theological outlook and in the kind of attention to concrete social forms that he models.

Despite those who continue to herald somewhat uncritically the benefits of online gathering, it seems that many churches are moving away from livestreaming their main services to preparing an offering that can be accessed remotely but which is no substitute for an in-person gathering. And although the Church of England has a well-founded desire to maintain a profile for online church nationally, [53] it has at the same time made a commitment to foster the creation of new ecclesial communities, led by lay people, meeting in houses and community locations. [54] 'God became incarnate: it is not our job to disincarnate him.'[55]

Notes

1 See e.g. Sherry Turkle, *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1984, 2005).

2 'The term Technique, as I use it, does not mean machines . . . or this or that procedure for attaining an end. In our technological society, technique is the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of human development) in every field of human activity' T*he Technological Society,* Translated by John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964), xxv.

3 Indeed, technology itself in modern English is approaching this sense in many usages, as it no longer simply applies to devices but is often used to imply a way of thinking or approaching life.

4 Matthew Prior, *Confronting Technology: The Theology of Jacques Ellul* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2020), 53.

5 See *Presence in the Modern World*, Translated by Lisa Richmond (Eugene: Cascade, 2016), chapter 1 for an early statement of Ellul's realism.

6 Prior, *Confronting Technology*, 204-15. See Jonathan Haidt's account of the primacy of affect and intuition in many of our moral judgments, and how to engage constructively in dialogue in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided about Politics and Religion* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

7 See Prior, *Confronting Technology*, 215-22, drawing on Ellul's work, *The New Demons*.

8 Sherry Turkle. *Reclaiming Conversation* (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 13. Turkle has been subject to strong critiques, usually along the lines that she presents a kind of elitist, anti-progressive nostalgia, see e.g. Marcus Breen. 'The Public Intellectual as Agent-Egoist: Sherry Turkle's Ethnography' found in *International Journal of Communication* (ijoc.org), Vol. 12, 2018. I contend she can defend herself well enough against these critiques in the substance of her writing.

9 Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World,* 5.

10 *Théologie et Technique*, 209. On the distinction in Augustine between *uti* and *frui*, see Karla Pollmann and Willemien Otten (eds.), T*he Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine* (Oxford: OUP, 2013).

11 Prior, *Confronting Technology*, 200-202, following David Gill.

12 This is a constructive line of thinking about Sabbath I find in Miroslav Volf's book, *Work in the Spirit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1991) and in Brian Brock's *Christian Ethics in a Technological Age* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010). Mark Scarlata suggests a similar reading of the relationship between Sabbath and work. He also helpfully traces the diverse ways the early Christians interpreted and practiced Sabbath in *Sabbath Rest: The Beauty of God's Rhythm for a Digital Age* (London: SPCK, 2018).

13 See my account of this in *Confronting Technology*, chapter 4.

14 This is hinted at by Ellul's reference to technique in various places as included in the 'glories of the nations' brought into the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21. "We may think we have clear data about our . . . works, those we deem good, which conform to God's will, but we cannot evaluate our political and technological works, and we will no doubt be surprised by what God keeps and what he destroys." Ellul, *What I Believe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 218.

15 Michael Burdett, *Eschatology and the Technological Future.* Routledge Studies in Religion 43 (New York: Routledge, 2015). Kate Ott, *Christian Ethics for a Digital Society* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2018)

16 Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), chapter 6. There is a resonance here between Ellul's work and Jurgen Moltmann's concept of a divine *adventus* over and against a humanly constructed *futurum*. See Michael Burdett, *Technology and the Eschatological Future*.

17 Jeffrey P. Greenman et al., *Understanding Jacques Ellul,* 142.

18 Prior, *Confronting Technology,* 125-128.

19 Zahl, *Grace in Practice* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 252. See e.g. https://lutherananglican.wordpress.com/paul-zahl/

20 See Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word,* translated by Joyce M. Hanks (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), chapter 5.

21 For a fuller account of the church and power, see the work of Luke Bretherton in the field of political theology, especially *Christ and the Common Life*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2019).

22 Some of his insights on language and community are echoed by Turkle in *Reclaiming Conversation, passim*, but her chapters on friendship and the public square especially.

23 Ellul did not write as prolifically about the Spirit of God as he did about the Word of God, and this is a deficit in his overall theological framework, I would contend.

24 This is an area for further exploration but there is a helpful mention here http://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/jacques-ellul-1912-1994-2/.

25 See for example Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics. Second Edition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2014), chapter 2, 'The Gifts God gives and the Gift of the Church' and chapter 4, 'How the Church Managed before Ethics'.

26 See the brief account of the interview with Rev Nicky Gumbel in Henry Mance, 'How the pandemic reinvigorated religion,' *Financial Times*, 22 May 2020.

27 "More than one million people pray online with Church of England podcast

and app," The Church of England, published November 1, 2022, https://www.churchofengland.org/media-and-news/press-releases/more-one-million-people-pray-online-church-england-podcast-and-app.

28 Rowan Williams, "What does being human look like in a time of pandemic?" the Talking Theology podcast found at https://podcast.cranmerhall.com/231001/4071230-rowan-williams-what-does-being-human-look-like-in-a-time-of-pandemic.

29 Peter Phillips, *Hybrid Church* (Cambridge: Grove, 2020), 6, noting that people had 'time on their hands'!

30 Stephen Williams (in my view) rightly cautions against speculating about the resurrection body precisely in this connection: 'the reason the New Testament has so little to say on how precisely we should conceive our future form is that its interest lies in the moral connection between our present bodily experience and future hope' in *The Robot Will See you Now* (London: SPCK, 2021), 100-101.

31 "Online activity requires offline organization and delivery. There is little (or nothing?) in the way of truly native online worship because the internet itself is a thoroughly embodied environment, by definition a place where enfleshed humans explore/experience/engage with information and experiences displayed/coded/assembled by other enfleshed humans." Pete Philips, in *The Distanced Church: Reflections on Doing Church Online*, Edited by Heidi A Campbell, https://oaktrust.library.tamu.edu/handle/1969.1/187891, 71-72 . See also his similar argument in *Hybrid Church*, 7.

32 See Wells' lecture for the charity Youthscape found here https://www.youthscape.co.uk/store/product/lecture-2021. Attending this live (online!) directly influenced some of my own thinking below.

33 For more on this, see Deanna Thompson. *The Virtual Body of Christ in a Suffering World* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016).

34 As documented at an early stage in Margot Hodson et al, *COVID-19, Environment, Justice and the Future* (Cambridge: Grove, 2020). For a more detailed study of the ecological impacts of digital technologies, see Kate Ott, *Christian Ethics*, chapter 4, 'Creation Connectivity.'

35 My colleague Sarah Pawlett Jackson at St Mellitus has done interesting work in this area. Pawlett-Jackson, Sarah. 'Three Bodies: Problems for Video-Conferencing,' *Phenomenology and Mind,* no. 20, 2021, 42-50. Found at http://www.rosenbergesellier.it/ita/scheda-libro?aaref=1485.

36 N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic*, (London, SPCK, 2020), 68, citing Plotinus.

37 Roberts, cited by Burridge, *Holy Communion in "Contagious Times* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock), 188. Roberts goes on to say "In Christian theology, physical existence matters. God creates a physical universe—it occupies specific space and is earthly. . . Both beliefs [real presence in bread and wine and bodily resurrection] stubbornly held on to the physical domain as the domain of salvation, not merely as a subordinate sign for a more superior spiritual domain of salvation. In each case, salvation is presenced physically. . . If the Church is the 'Body of Christ' it cannot, by definition, exist in a simulated form. It only gathers as a church physically". Burridge's defence is that his practice ensured that meetings were contemporaneous through Zoom, and also in the same, albeit technologically-mediated, space.

38 For the direction this is going, see Facebook/Meta's new investment in the so-called Metaverse as discussed by Alexander Garton here, https://www.oxfordhouseresearch.com/new-year-new-reality-on-the-ethics-and-metaphysics-of-zuckerbergs-meta-verse/.

39 Barack Obama, *A Promised Land* (London: Penguin, 2020), 508-516.

40 See e.g., Suler J. The online disinhibition effect. Cyberpsychol Behav. 2004 Jun; 7(3):321-6. Found here https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15257832/.

41 Ott gives an able account of this in *Christian Ethics*, chapter 2, 'Networked Selves'.

42 Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation,* 126-131.

43 Simone Weil. 'Reflections on the Right Use of Studies' in *Waiting on God* (London: Routledge, 1951), 105-116. Chapter found online at https://www.themathesontrust.org/papers/christianity/Weil-Reflections.pdf.

44 Weil, *Waiting on God,* 114.

45 Technology criticism here often turns to the question of focal practices, which are embodied activities, such as walking in the natural world, silence and solitude, cultivating the earth and the plastic arts. These practices foster habits of attention which are in tension with technological habits. See the work of Albert Borgmann.

46 Again, see e.g. Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation,* 212-248 on education and 'attentional disarray'.

47 Nathan Mladin and Stephen Williams, in *The Robot,* 215, drawing on Shoshana Zuboff's landmark book, *Surveillance Capitalism*.

48 Oregon-based pastor John Mark Comer gives this figure in his book *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2019), 36, citing a study found here https://www.businessinsider.com/dscout-research-people-touch-cell-phones-2617-times-a-day-2016-7?r=US&IR=T.

49 Brent Laytham, *iPod, YouTube, Wii Play: Theological Engagements with Entertainment* (Eugene: Cascade, 2012), 61.

50 See e.g. Michael Budde, 'Collecting Praise: Global Culture Industries' in Eds. Hauerwas and Wells, *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2011).

51 See e.g., Hebrews 10:24-25, 'And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching' (NRSV).

52 To do justice to Pete Phillips' position, he does argue that Christian formation cannot be conducted entirely online (Peter Phillips, Hybrid Church).

53 See "Church online," https://www.churchofengland.org/prayer-and-worship/church-online. This exists alongside a (perhaps more questionable) continuing investment in its smart speaker Amazon Alexa skill.

54 As outlined here, https://ccx.org.uk/content/interview-john-mcginley/ and reported here https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2021/2-july/news/uk/synod-to-discuss-target-of-10-000-new-lay-led-churches-in-the-next-ten-years. I dare to think that Ellul might have approved of such a move, though I suspect he would rightly critique the unnecessarily grandiose target of 10,000!

55 Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 5.

What Happened to Ethics During the Pandemic? A Comparison of Edward Hall's Triad and Jacques Ellul's Technique

Mark Honneger

Jacques Ellul repeatedly pointed out in his writings that the technological society by nature avoids moral deliberation. He said in The Technological Society,

> … a principal characteristic of technique … is its refusal to tolerate moral judgments. It is absolutely independent of them and eliminates them from its domain. Technique never observes the distinction between moral and immoral use. It tends … to create a completely independent technical morality. (Ellul 1964, 97)

However, this doesn't mean that ethical considerations have disappeared from public discourse. This unequal marriage between technique and ethics has especially been on display during the COVID-19 pandemic. The public discourse on all sides of the issues related to vaccinations, masking, quarantining, etc. was highly charged with ethical appeals and moral condemnations. Unfortunately, this didn't lead to any meeting of the minds or increased understanding or tolerance between groups who disagreed on COVID-19 policies. A further complication is that ethics turns out to be an area of human life where opposing groups can use the same words but mean different things. Technicized and non-technicized people can use the same words but mean different things. For example, Ellul's well-known maxim, "Think globally, act locally," to a technicized person could mean "apply technique to a local problem"—not the solution Ellul would have in mind. I propose to discuss this challenge through the cultural lens of the

"What Happened to Ethics During the Pandemic? A Comparison of Edward Hall's Triad and Jacques Ellul's Technique" *Ellul Forum* 71 (Spring 2023): 45–58.

anthropologist Edward Hall and his seminal proposal that culture consists of three levels: the formal, the informal, and the technical. Hall's work can help us to understand how technique is connected to human community and also how technique has reinterpreted and not simply eradicated ethics. Whereas Ellul emphasizes how *technique* dehumanizes people, Hall shows how *the technical level* of culture is an expression of our humanity.

Hall's Three Levels of Culture

Ever since Sigmund Freud developed his idea of the unconscious, there has been a growing awareness of two levels of culture, called by different names. This paper (following Hall), will distinguish these two levels with the terms *formal* and *informal*. In his book *The Silent Language* (1959, 1981), Hall added a third level: the technical. His analysis brings a cross-cultural and anthropological perspective to Ellul's concept of *technique*. The historical record suggests that all three levels have been present in human cultures from the very beginning (Hall 1981).

Hall and fellow anthropologist George Trager arrived at their tripartite theory by studying how Americans used and thought of time, observing that there were three kinds: formal time, which controls daily life and is taken for granted; informal time, which relates to situational time and uses imprecise expressions such as "awhile" and "in a minute;" and technical time, which is used by scientists and technicians.

The formal level is the overt part of culture that is taught by "precept and admonition" (Hall 1981). The informal level is tacit and learned by the imitation of examples around us. Hall's technical level is akin to Ellul's *technological operation*. It denotes the human use of tools and procedures which have obtained in all times and places to varying degrees. Hall here recognizes something like technique (applied to abstractions such as culture and law) as an ancient phenomenon. This has implications for considering technique in its modern setting. Though Ellul observed how in the modern era "techniques [were] becoming less and less material" (Ellul 1964, 268), he also described in *The Theological Foundation of Law* how law had evolved into a highly technical framework in such ancient cultures as the Roman Empire. He argued for example,

> When, for instance, law has become purely technical in several nations, the law which is technically most advanced will impose itself everywhere. This is what happened with Roman law. This is also what happened with the French Civil Code which spread to countries as dissimilar as Japan and Turkey. But in this purely technical law any criterion of law or non-law may be adopted. (Ellul 1969, 29)

Hall also suggested that the tendency towards the technical has been a longstanding organization of culture, and it is a component of culture that is not dependent on a society's possession of material technology. Ellul does recognize the ancient roots of technique ("Technical activity is the most primitive activity of man," (Ellul 1964, 23), and his assertion "the law which is technically most advanced will impose itself everywhere" looks like an early description of technique (early both in human history and in his own research). This ability of the technical to "impose" itself raises the question of why? What is it about human nature that makes it susceptible to domination by technology?

Ellul in *The Technological Society* began to address this question:

> And here we face a mystery. What is the origin of this activity? It [technical activity] is a phenomenon which admits of no complete explanation. By patient research, one finds areas of imitation, transitions from one technical form to another, examples of penetration. But at the core there is a closed area—the phenomenon of *invention*. (Ellul 1964, 23)

Ellul went on to add,

> It can be shown that technique is absorbed into man's psychology and depends upon that psychology and upon what has been called technical motivation. But we have no explanation of how an activity which once did not exist came to be. (Ellul 1964, 23)

Hall's concept of technical culture provides an answer to Ellul's questions. It suggests that technique is not simply something that "is absorbed into man's psychology"; rather, technical culture is an intrinsic part of human

psychology.

Hall cited numerous cross-cultural examples in *The Silent Language* where one of the three levels predominated in some sphere of life. Technical culture is taught explicitly using logical analysis and a coherent outline. Hall named the American armed forces as a particularly fine example, where techniques have been worked out for training large masses of recruits. The success of the training depended less on the aptitude of the student and more on how the organization of the material. Hall cited the need for trained technicians during World War II. It had been assumed that people with mechanical aptitude would make good airplane mechanics, but it turned out that a good shoe clerk would make a better mechanic than someone who had fixed cars all his life, because the most important trait was not mechanical aptitude but the ability to follow instructions. The best recruit was "a mildly obsessional person who could read and follow instructions," and not someone who had their own ideas on how to fix machines. (This example parallels many examples Ellul provides of technique as diminishing the need for human talent and excellence and also of technique using humans that are most adaptable to its rigors.)

Hall observed that these three states of culture were fluid and would shift into one another: "formal activity tends to become informal, informal tends toward the technical, and very often the technical will take on the trappings of a new formal system" (Hall 1981, 87) I believe these changes can be applied to Ellul's understanding of technique as the technological swallowing-up of society that substitutes a will to power and the worship of progress for values that promote human flourishing. The powerful success of technology has become a new formal system, and this formal system has become informal ideology. Echoing Ellul, Hall writes,

… a good deal of what goes under the heading of science would more appropriately be classed as a new formal system which is very rapidly displacing or altering our older formal systems centered in folk beliefs and religion. (Hall 1981, 66)

Hall provides here a cultural framework for the success of technique in terms of cultural change. Human spontaneity is culturally conditioned, and

technique makes spontaneity conscious and rational and therefore controlled—an example of the informal cultural becoming technical culture. The push for technical solutions for all problems is an example of technical culture becoming formal culture. Propaganda, with its unconscious manipulation of the human personality, is an example of formal culture becoming informal culture (Ellul 1973). Following this chain of reasoning, technique can be viewed in cultural terms as an increase in technical culture at the expense of much formal culture and also as a substitution of the values of technical progress in place of other values for both formal and informal culture.

One of Hall's claims is that it is extremely difficult to carry out more than one element of the formal/informal/technical triad at the same time. Though all three are present in various situations, only one will dominate at a time, another characteristic of Ellul's *technique*. Hall's framework provides us with tools both to understand how technique and technology become a part of formal and informal culture and also to communicate to those whose ethics have been shaped by the technological society. Without ethical common ground, identical words and phrases don't communicate. Hall suggests,

> If a person really wants to help introduce culture change he or she should find out what is happening on the informal level and pinpoint which informal adaptations seem to be most successful in daily operations. Bring these to the level of awareness. Even this process can only accelerate change, not actually control it in the manner desired by people of action. This is because the out-of-awareness nature of the informal is where all changes start. (Hall 1981, 93)

Cultures Mediate Ethics

All this can help us understand better the public discourse of COVID-19. As culture becomes fixated on technique, ethics will be mediated and shaped by technique. Ellul had stated in *The Theological Foundation of Law* that "the content of law is, in fact, fundamentally the same everywhere." (Ellul 1969, 28) While ethics is universal, ethical application is implemented via cultur-

al understandings and expressed in ways that are acceptable to the cultural perspectives of groups. Much of that framework is unconscious to people themselves, because culture largely operates beneath the level of consciousness. Using Hall and Ellul together show us how the "same" ethics changes when it is expressed in technicized and non-technicized worldviews.

To give one example of the unconscious way in which culture gives form to ethics: American culture has long been on a path where it has grown increasingly uncomfortable with giving overt negative criticism in a variety of settings. One way Americans apply this is by wrapping negative assessment within compliments and positive comments, as in the customary American dictum: "Say four nice things for every one negative thing you say." In educational settings, teachers are often admonished to praise a student and find something good in their work before they point out something to criticize.

In contrast, there are cultures that affirm the ethical value of giving negative feedback, such as French and Israeli culture. When asked their reasons, one can often hear the idea that the truth is most important, and it should not pay the price for "being nice." In a cross-cultural setting, Americans don't realize how their ethical perspective can be very confusing to someone from a culture that gives out compliments more reticently and prioritizes truth-telling over sparing one's feelings.

The cultural differences here channel the ethical concerns, with American culture prioritizing being nice over saying the truth and French culture prioritizing saying the truth over being nice. In *The Culture Map*, Erin Meyer tells a humorous story of a French expatriate Sabine, "a highly energetic finance director" who moved from her native France to take a two-year assignment in Chicago that she had been seeking for several years. Meyer, an expert on cross-cultural business communication based in France, had prepped Sabine for her move to American culture. After four months in the U.S., Meyer called Sabine's American boss for a pre-scheduled follow-up conversation to see how the move was going.

Jake, Sabine's boss, gave a critical evaluation. He said,

> … there are several critical things that I need Sabine to change about the way she is working, and I don't see her making an effort to do so.… I have spoken to her a handful of times about these things, but she is not getting the message. She just continues with her same work patterns. I spoke to her last Thursday about this again, but there's still no visible effort on her part…. We had her performance review this morning and I detailed these issues again. We'll wait and see. But if she doesn't get in gear with these things, I don't think this job is going to work out. (Meyer 2014, 7-8)

Meyer, understandably concerned, later called Sabine to ask her how the job was going. She replied,

> Things are going great! My team is terrific. I've really been able to connect with them. And I have a great relationship with my boss. *Je m'epanouis*! ["I'm blossoming."] For the first time in my career, I've found a job that is just perfect for me…. Oh, and I have to tell you—I had my first performance review this morning. I'm just delighted! It was the best performance review I have had since starting with this company. I often think I will try to extend my stay beyond these two years, things are going so well. (Meyer 2014, 8)

Why was there such a misunderstanding between the American boss and the French employee? Upon probing deeper, Meyer identified how the opposing values of American culture and French culture led to the breakdown in communication. Americans tend to give positive evaluations openly while negative evaluations are wrapped in copious positive comments. French culture tends to give negative feedback more directly and positive feedback implicitly. Thus, it was not surprising that when Sabine received her performance review she heard the positive comments but not the negative; she and her boss harbored different expectations for what each meant. Also important for our purposes is that Jake interpreted Sabine's ethically. Why would she not change when he had told her to? Humans are moral beings who tend to interpret others' actions ethically, not neutrally.

Hall gives another example of how culture mediates ethics which also illustrates the formal, informal, and technical aspects of culture. It is an episode that comes from the Depression era, but it is familiar enough to be appreciated today. He begins by discussing the generalities of Hispanic and Anglo American cultures with regard to the interaction of law, government, and family. At that time, the institution of the family in Hispanic culture was developed to a size and influence that far outstripped its role in Anglo culture. Yet government occupied a much smaller rule than it did in Anglo culture. If something needed to happen in the community, families were better at handling the affair than the government.

These observations reflect the role of law in each culture. Law in Latin culture was enforced technically but mediated through the family (cf. Ellul's comments about the technical nature of law in the Roman Empire), whereas in Anglo culture, law was not supposed to be harshly applied and was to be guided by formal aspects of the culture. Hence, the law should not be stricter than the rest of the culture, and when it was, it must be changed. If an Anglo-American comes across an unjust law, he or she is more likely to violate it.

These two different cultures came into serious conflict in a town in the western United States over the enforcement of the speed limit (Hall 1981, 80-83). The town was predominantly Spanish, and its motorcycle policeman named Sancho was also culturally Spanish. His duties included the responsibility of enforcing the speed limit of fifteen miles per hour, not only in town but also on the outskirts, which included a stretch of two national highways.

Sancho would arrest people who drove sixteen mph, which brought a fine of $12.75, a large sum of money during the depression. Why? Because law was enforced as a technical matter. However, the influence of family meant that when Spanish-Americans were brought before the court, they usually had a cousin or uncle on the bench and were typically acquitted.

Both cultures had the same outcome (driving sixteen miles per hour was not ultimately punished) but got there by different routes. The Anglo culture viewed speed limits informally so that there was a gray area where

some small number of miles per hour above the speed limit was overlooked. The Spanish culture had no gray area but allowed family to adjudicate in minor matters. Among their own culture, no one paid a fine for driving sixteen miles per hour, although Anglos were bewildered and angry when they were fined in these instances. Each culture viewed the other with suspicion. Anglo culture expected law to be enforced impartially once it was set in motion, and Spanish culture expected law to be applied technically but not enforced impartially.

Ethics and the Discourse of COVID-19

This discussion exemplifies the biblical teaching that ethics is a universal component of the human heart (Romans 1). Ellul had pointed out that the technological society renders ethical questions moot; Ellul didn't mean that humans have abandoned ethics, but rather have reinterpreted ethics to fit their modern worldview.

For example, let's consider a verse like James 4:17: "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (ESV). Do people believe this and live by this today? I believe this is a case of how ethics has become culturally transformed by technology becoming informal culture. The growth of technology has led to the belief that everything should be solved by technology, and technology is something achieved by society, rather than being an individual responsibility. A long time ago, technology was a tool among many tools in the human toolbox, and technology was used to solve some problems but not every problem. Now technology is the only tool in the toolbox. If technology is the only tool in the toolbox, then the right thing to do is to provide a technical solution, and failure to do so is a corporate and government failure, not an individual failure. This leads logically to propaganda and the compulsion that social pressure must be brought to bear to force the government and other corporate bodies to do the "right" thing. The "Technique Translation" of James 4:17 might be:

> 'Society must solve every problem by technique, and it has failed if it does not do so.'

The person has become society. Sin has become failure. The right thing has

become technique. This, perhaps, is one of the most distinctive characteristics of modern society that is dominated by technology: how the locus of ethics has been (unconsciously) changed from the individual person to the entire society.

We can see this ethical understanding in the COVID-19 pandemic, which illustrates Ellul's elucidation of technique. In the following comments, I am not taking a stand on the science of any position on the treatment or prevention of COVID-19 but simply observing it from the lens of Ellul's technique and Hall's three levels of culture. The pandemic begins as an example of how technology solves problems and at the same time creates new problems. The highly developed transportation sector that moves people and goods easily and quickly across the globe also lead to the rapid spreading of a virus before it was diagnosed. Even after lockdowns and restrictions on travel were enacted around the world, new variants of COVID from places like England, Brazil, South Africa, and India still emerged in the United States and other countries, a testimony to how technology has shrunk the world for both good and ill, rendering the problems of the entire world into every individual's problem as well. (If it turns out that COVID-19 was engineered through human research and escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan, China, we have another example of technology creating new problems.)

The ethics of the pandemic was that people demanded technical solutions to the problem of COVID-19. The only individual responsibility was to conform to the mandates issued by governments and health authorities. The glories of technology were on full display as multiple vaccines with what appeared to be high efficacy were developed in record time, a real witness to the power of human technology. Technique constantly speeds up the pace of human life, and here is a success story of science inventing medical solutions at a record speed. The inherent goodness of technique also expressed itself as the inherent goodness of global solutions. Technique tends to the global rather than the particular; its logic is to ignore context and treat all things uniformly. Hence, the public discourse promoted by propaganda was the one "best" solution, which was vaccines, rather than treatment or amelioration of the disease. Insofar as vaccines were *the* solution to the pandemic, and the solution appeared to be working, the whole scenario justified technique and reinforced the belief that it is the

one Savior for the world going forward. I have been particularly fascinated by the propaganda dimension of COVID-19. Though science is inherently a messy process with competing views and theories jostling to explain the world, the major media in the U.S. had to present one explanation at a time, and dissenting views, even from reputable scientists, were not allowed to be a part of the public discourse. When changes in policy were introduced into the narrative, as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eventually did with regard to the length of quarantine after someone was diagnosed with COVID, there was an outcry about muddled messaging, rather than an acknowledgment that science is an evolving endeavor where understanding changes as research is conducted and refined. Ellul has described how people are so conditioned to propaganda and comforted by it that open and free discourse is threatening to them: "The individual subjected to propaganda can no longer do without it" (Ellul 1965, 182).

Once the pandemic arrived, the propaganda of the mass media shifted into high gear. There was tremendous pressure applied to promote the government's policies and an overall condemnation of expressing independent judgment on the virus and responses to it. This condemnation was moral in tenor. Many stories were told about how a member of some family died from COVID-19 (usually unvaccinated); therefore, it was unethical to think differently from the official positions voiced in the media.

COVID-19 has also been a poster child for how technology and its consequences destroy community and human wellbeing. Physical distancing and masks and social lockdowns have led to social isolation and a loss of the spiritual renewal received from face-to-face interaction. On the whole, the pandemic has been a fine example of the new ethics that stem from technique and from technical culture that has become informal culture.

I end with a few implications of combining Hall with Ellul. When Hall's tripartite theory is added to Ellul's developed understanding of technique, it raises at least two other issues to consider with regard to technique. First, Hall's work on technical culture emphasizes that it has been an intrinsic part of human society from of old and found in all societies. Hall gives examples of non-western societies in which an important technical culture plays a significant role in daily life. Though Ellul often emphasizes the

uniqueness of modern technique, it is of a piece with technical culture from previous millennia. It is intriguing to consider the Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11; interpreters focus on its explanations for the origin of languages, but through Ellul's lens, it just as much speaks to technique. When God says, "Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6-7, ESV), it sounds like an early warning about technique and its vast power. While the modern era has seen this intensification, which Ellul reacted to so strenuously, perhaps there is insight to be gained by probing more its longstanding presence in human culture. These considerations might begin to help us answer why technique even exists in the first place. Ellul's and Hall's work together suggest that technique had to come into existence. The reasoning would be as follows:

Human culture contains formal, informal, and technical culture.

These are all intrinsic aspects of the human heart and human community. They define what it means to be human.

All these levels contain potentials which may or may not be realized by a given society.

Ellul has taught us, if something can happen, it will happen. (Ellul 1964, 99)

Hence, the intrinsic potential of technical culture had to become technique.

Second, the longstanding existence of technical culture can cause us to revisit our ethical assessment of technique. Why did ancient cultures follow technical means when they did? What were their motivations, spiritual or otherwise? Why did the Roman Empire follow a technical application of law? Was it forced upon them by circumstances? Ellul often explains how size forces the intensification of technique. Was there some other value that they were pursuing? Hall, who trained Americans in both business and government to work overseas, advised them to be careful about introducing changes that violated formal norms. One way to achieve this was

to introduce technical changes, which he saw as a way of avoiding cultural conflict. (Ellul makes a similar comment in *The Technological Society* (Ellul 1964, 123). These changes could be introduced into their technical culture (which exists in all cultures) or introduced as a new system complete in itself. For example, air travel was introduced into parts of Latin America before the automobile stage had even been reached. Implicit in this advice is the feeling that technical culture is neutral, and I believe that this is one of the real powers in technique—the sense that it is value-free, having to do with technology and obvious human needs and so also something that avoids moral debate and assessment. As institutions in the world grow and their need for more power increases, which entails incorporating more people into their domain, technical culture or technique does create a kind of unity. On the basis of Hall's premise of a level of technical culture in addition to formal and informal culture, one could say that this is a unity realized through at least this idea—there is a real shared understanding of the goodness and neutrality of technology. Though Hall observes some of the same phenomena as Ellul, he did not hold a negative view of technical culture as Ellul did of technique.

Ellul emphasized that technique is produced without a plan, but the question still arises: what was motivating people when they increased technique? The conclusion that emerges from this analysis is that it is an effective way to evade the moral component of life, especially as it is expressed in formal culture. It may be that people seek to evade it for slightly different reasons. Some people may simply wish to throw off moral constraints, but others may seek to evade the moral component of life as it is expressed in formal culture in order to avoid cultural conflict, and they use technical culture (thought to be neutral) to unite people, a move Hall even suggested to Americans who were trying to cross cultural boundaries. Seeking to avoid conflict between different peoples is a worthy goal. At the same time, humans are ethical beings, and their ethics does not disappear but is rather reinterpreted so that technique itself becomes the overriding ethical good. I would suggest that those who like Ellul are concerned with technique need to understand the full range of reasons for why people esteem and justify technique.

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Response to Mark Honneger

Jacob Marques Rollison

It is an honor to take part in this dialogue with Mark Honegger. Spending time with Mark was a highlight of my participation in the January 2022 IJES conference in Strasbourg, France. Professor Honegger's astute awareness of cultural difference was for me as rich a source of learning in person as it is in the article to which I am replying. With that in mind, I hope my remarks here will be a continuation of the dialogue we started then, opening up further discussion as well.

Professor Honegger's article is my first encounter with the thought of Edward Hall, so I am incompetent to judge Honegger's reading of Hall (which I found instructive and interesting). In this short reply, I would like to probe Honegger's reading of Ellul. I will suggest that diving deeper into Ellul's thought would yield a more nuanced picture of Ellul which differs in at least two major ways. We might call these ways *anthropologically/ontologically*, and *ethically*. Taking these differences into account, I propose, would lead to a richer (if probably also a more critical) juxtaposition of these two thinkers.

First, I think that Honegger's reading of Ellul is different from what I see in Ellul in terms of *anthropology*, or even *ontology*. At times, Honegger employs phrases such as: "intrinsic part of human psychology"; "…ethics is a universal component of the human heart"; and perhaps most notably, "…intrinsic aspects of the human heart and human community…define what it is to be human." As I read Ellul, reasoning this way is quite foreign to his thought. It seems to me that Ellul is not interested in defining the human as a *being*, but focuses on examining the relations in which human beings find themselves, and especially the relations the human creates or modifies

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with the others, society, God, etc. While Ellul is very interested in human behavior, ethics, institutions, and societies, an approach which seeks what is universally common among these things is generally more philosophical than what Ellul is after. This matters because this difference in reasoning would push back on how Honegger sees Ellul's and Hall's works together, "suggesting that technique had to come into existence." In somewhat academic terms, we might say that the 'existential' elements of Ellul's thought imply that reference a fixed anthropology or ontology are of limited value to the human's *ethical* task; the transition from the 'is' that these ways of study can give us to the 'ought' of ethics can only see anthropology or ontology as conditioning factors, never as normative or determinative necessities. More prosaically: because Ellul finds human freedom to be so integral to being human, if what Ellul means by technique "had to come into existence", Ellul's thought would raise the question of whether the human really existed at all. (This also points, perhaps, to a bigger difference between Hall's 'technical culture' and Ellul's *la technique* than Honegger's article seems to suggest.)

Perhaps the ways in which this difference matters will be more striking and significant on the *ethical* level. Honegger cites Ellul's *Theological Foundation of Law*: "…the content of law is, in fact, fundamentally the same everywhere." Honegger's next line interprets and applies this citation thus: "While ethics is universal, ethical application is implemented via cultural understandings…" However, I think that Ellul's thought pushes back strongly on the idea that various cultures mediate one universal ethic. The *content* of law which is "fundamentally the same everywhere" is what law contains—rules about marriage, taboos, etc.; it is not *what law says* about marriage, taboos, etc. 'Ethics' might be said to be universal as a human problem; 'law' might be said to be universal as a human creation. (For more on this, cf. the recent publication of Ellul's lectures on 'philosophy of law' [*Philosophie du droit*].) But the prodigious diversity of answers to the ethical problem and the varying approaches to law are recurring emphases in Ellul's thought. This is most notable ethically in *To Will & To Do*, vol. I, ch. I, where Ellul states: "…the medieval presupposition that Western morality is really a universal morality persists. A morality exists everywhere, in every society, but it is not necessarily the same. Morality has no permanent

content." In terms of law, Ellul's recurring critiques of natural law (and of its use by Christian theologians) situates this approach which sees law as a universal, given phenomenon as one of several stages of legal evolution common to many societies.

This matters, in turn, because it raises questions about how Honegger uses Hall to situate technique as something neutral, and how that idea then effects ethical reasoning. By downplaying Ellul's emphasis on what is *different* between modern technique and a more historically evident 'technical culture,' in combination with the separation between a 'universal ethics' and its cultural mediation, Honegger's conclusion that technique "is an effective way to evade the moral component of life" in cross-cultural interactions can be presented as a rather self-evident way of seeking a shared goal of 'human flourishing.' However, if modern technique is different from 'technical culture,' and if (with Ellul) one rejects the assumed universal ethic underlying a given 'cultural' expression, the operation of seeking to introduce a change at the level of 'technical culture' in cross-cultural interaction to avoid conflict is less neutral than it seems. (Indeed, Honegger's article already suggests that avoiding conflict is particularly valued in American culture.) Despite the legitimacy in Honegger's highlighting of various motives in this operation, in its worst instances, this may be precisely an instance of what Ellul finds destructive in *technique*: it sees an interaction with another culture in terms of obtaining a certain result—effecting the desired change with minimal resistance or conflict—rather than treating the other as a partner in dialogue able to push back on one's own conceptions, values, etc.

As a keen student of the link between the individual and society, Ellul would certainly agree with Honegger that "technical culture or technique does create a kind of unity". But everything depends on *what kind* of unity. Ellul's lament in *The Technological Society* is that the quality of this unity has shifted in a way which he finds destructive for human freedom. The difference between 'technical culture' and modern 'technique' means that the respective unities created by each would differ immensely; Ellul might be heard as pleading in favor of how human freedom can be one source of the former, but is curbed by the latter.

Review of *Theology and Technology, Volumes 1 and 2*

Jason Hudson

Mitcham, Carl, Jim Grote, and Levi Checketts, eds. *Theology and Technology, Volume 1.* **Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2022.**

Mitcham, Carl, Jim Grote, and Levi Checketts, eds. *Theology and Technology, Volume 2.* **Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2022.**

Theology and Technology is an essential collection of essays for readers seeking to think deeply about the intersection of theology and technology. Edited and organized for republication by Levi Checketts, this collection, originally published as a single volume in 1984, is particularly useful for students of Jacques Ellul as it places Ellul's voice alongside many of his contemporaries. The breadth of engagement is invaluable to understanding the context of Ellul's work, and the depth of thinking provides critical perspectives that can challenge Ellul.

Volume 1

Checketts has divided the essays into two volumes, the first of which focuses primarily on methodology in theological approaches to technology. As Carl Mitcham's introductory essay, "Technology as Theological Problem in the Christian Tradition," explains, Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* provides the organizational schema for the essays contained in the first volume, moving through five orientations of Christianity toward technology which correspond generally to Neibuhr's five orientations of Christianity

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toward culture. Mitcham commends a modification of two positions, those of George Blair and André Malet. He concludes: "It is from such an oppositionist/dualist position that the most fruitful exegesis of the tension between technology and the Christian tradition can begin" (17).

The essay that follows Mitcham's introduction, "Faith Outside Technique" by George Blair, corresponds to Niebuhr's Christ opposed to culture. Blair argues for the incompatibility of technology with Christianity. He identifies the technological mode of being as distinct from particular technological devices or methods. "A Christian," he writes, "who longs to right the wrongs of the world is a Christian who has succumbed to the technical mentality" (21). Blair's fideist approach calls Christians to reject the technological mode of engagement with the world and be happy in relation to an infinitely happy God.

While his aspirational break with technique is provocative and inspirational, it falls short in two ways, according to my Ellul-influenced estimation. First, the eschatological and dialectical dimensions, so critical for Ellul, are absent. These omissions lead Blair to the quietism and determinism of which Ellul is often wrongly accused. For example, Blair claims, "God created the world that it be what it is, not necessarily that it be headed somewhere" (23). There is no eschatological intentionality to human vocation, for Blair. The second weakness of this approach is that it does not adequately account for the necessity of technology. Modern society is thoroughly technological. Even if Christianity and technology are incompatible, a point that seems inconsistent with biblical theology, the fact remains that there must be an accounting for the technological nature of modern life. Even extreme monastic and ascetic approaches are unlikely to achieve freedom from the ubiquitous and complex technological system.

In Essay 3, "Through Christian Technology to Technological Christianity," Wilhelm Fudpucker argues the opposite pole—Christ of technology. He takes up the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin to argue that technology and Christianity are "intimately, even mystically, intertwined" (25). This approach is the most unacceptable from an Ellulian perspective. Readers of Ellul will know the name Teilhard de Chardin as a frequent recipient of

Ellul's ire. In a bold statement that summarizes his perspective, Fudpucker writes, "Technology is an anonymous Christianity waiting to be named" (37). Compared to Blair, Fudpucker espouses the eschatological but not the dialectical. He has only the "yes" of God but lacks the "no."

Without the dialectical dimension, Fudpucker baptizes the myth of technologically wrought progress and falls into ideology. His ideology is most transparent in two instances. First, he fails to recognize the interconnectedness of the technological system, writing, "Freed from political constraints, engineers would never build instruments of destruction; liberated from economic demands, the technological eros for efficiency would reduce pollution to the point of insignificance" (31). Avoiding the obvious question of why one should trust the benevolence of engineers or the technological drive for efficiency, Ellul would remind Fudpucker that in a technological society, economy and politics are reduced to technique. Secondly, Fudpucker declares without justification that "Nazi death camps and environmental pollution are no part of God's saving plan. But neither are they part of the essence of modern technology" (31). This assertion, too, begs many questions. Chief among them is why some technological outcomes should be considered essential to technology while others are attributed to other non-technological factors.

The remaining three methods represent a spectrum of more moderate approaches which allow, to varying degrees, dialogue between Christianity and technology. The first is Terry Tekippe's "Bernard Lonergan: A Context for Technology." Tekippe takes up the thought of the Jesuit priest to set theology above technology as a governing or regulative vantage point, which he relegates to the realm of common sense knowledge, the realm of mundane making and doing. Though Tekippe falls into some of the ideologies of Fudpucker and makes claims about insight and refusal of insight without sufficient defense of his epistemology, he improves on the former method by acknowledging that an outside perspective is needed, "that a realistic humanism will have to look beyond itself and seek resources other than its own. Such a solution will be in other words, 'super-natural'" (57). In this way Tekippe cracks open the door to the dialectical relationship between the Word of God and the world of technology. Yet his essay leaves

too many questions unanswered and assumes too much epistemologically and metaphysically. For example in a section titled "The Solution" Tekippe contends, "Not force, then, but detached intelligence—detached in the sense of unbiased—is the answer to the human predicament" (56). Despite the obvious questions about the possibility or desirability of such unbiased detachment, we must also ask which theological perspectives lead to such detachment. Christian revelation resists technique, as Ellul has labored to demonstrate; however, resistance is not the result of detached rationality, as Tikippe suggests.

In Essay 5, André Malet represents a method that is close to Ellul's, though likely more pessimistic about the possibility of the redemption of technology. Malet firmly establishes the opposition between God and technology. "Science and technology," he writes, "are in fact a unifying and totalizing project" (62). He sees the realm of technology as the objective plane of reality. He acknowledges the necessity of technology and the legitimacy of science and technology as a way of approaching creation. In fact, he argues that creation provokes this technological orientation. However, against this mode, he hears another call from God: "It is a call which is the very antithesis of the call of science and technique" (69). Malet argues that the despair of technology is to hear only the call of science/technology and to become subject to the tools that quantify objective reality. His point resonates in a society that counts calories, steps, and friends with the help of technological devices. Against this technological mode of measurement and objectification, Malet reminds the reader that God's call is to reject power and receive God's gifts.

The final method, described in Egbert Schuurman's "A Christian Philosophical Perspective on Technology," engages most directly with Ellul. While Schuurman's essay suggests much resonance with Ellul, he takes issues with Ellul at several points. He claims that, "To approach the future of technology from [Ellul's] non-biblical perspective does not leave open the possibility of deliverance. I do not agree with such a position" (78). Based on this statement, it seem that Schuurman has not thoroughly understood Ellul who above all desired to be biblical and saw the God of the Bible to be above all the liberating God. He particularly takes issue with Ellul's view of the autonomy of technique. Schuurman, rather, sees technology as dependent. His failure in regard to Ellul is that he has not appreciated Ellul's dialectical method. As much as Ellul paints a bleak picture of the lack of freedom humans experience in the face of technique, he ultimately agrees with Schuurman that a complex relationship between human and divine action is necessary to give shape to history. However, in underappreciating the autonomy of technique and its demonic dimension, as espoused by Ellul, Schuurman is overly optimistic about the ability of converted people to master technology and wield it for the Kingdom of God. Given the necessity of technology, culture, politics, et al. Schuurman is right that technology must be submitted to the higher authority of God's Kingdom. However, from an Ellulian perspective, submission is precisely what technique cannot endure. In fact, such a reduction would cancel out the essence of technique.

The two concluding chapters bring these essays into conversation with contemporary concerns via an essay by Checketts and an interview with Carl Mitcham reflecting on how his position has evolved since 1984. In the former, Checketts argues for the sacralization of technology through contact with holy people. He traces this phenomenon in crucifixion, the printing press, and transoceanic navigation. He shows how in each instance the technology was transformed or sacralized by its interactions with Christians who took up the technologies for sacred purposes. These examples are suggestive and there is much to consider in them. However, in the case of the cross, the technique was subverted and became a symbol of its opposite. The symbol of death and imperial power became a symbol of resurrection and life. In the other two examples, it is certainly true technology expanded the Kingdom of God. The extent to which they became sacred is debatable. Checketts's study would benefit from the consideration of the extent to which the original technological intentions were subverted by their Christian applications.

Again, here, it seems that from an Ellulian perspective, this approach is too optimistic about the ability to 'baptize' technology. Nonetheless, Checketts concludes his essay with an openness to the possibility that new technologies could take on the significance of these three forerunners. When the ideology that technology *will* take on such significance is avoided, this hopeful openness is completely Ellulian. Nothing is certain, and this allows for cautious hope.

In the penultimate chapter, "Theology and Technology Revisited," Carl Mitcham expresses his current reservations about the collection he and Jim Grote first edited. First, he critiques the structure by acknowledging the weaknesses of Neibuhr's typology. His further misgivings largely relate to his conversion to Buddhism. At the core of his current critique is his conviction that religions that claim exclusivity are technological, pragmatic, imperialistic, and violent. In this chapter, Checketts and Mitcham engage in an insightful and charitable debate about the validity of this idea.

In his conclusion, Checketts provides an overview of where he sees the field of theology and technology today. He also calls for action, for a new crop of scholars—preferably from a diversity of perspectives—to take up the task begun decades ago. Surely I am not unique as a student of Ellul who feels like a misfit in many settings: not quite a theologian, nor philosopher, nor sociologist, nor evangelical, nor progressive, nor conservative. Given the presence of such misfits, I pray that Checkett's call will be answered and that a new wave of theology and technology studies will engage with the challenges presented by emerging technologies.

Volume 2

The essays in volume 2 focus on biblical hermeneutics and virtue formation, and generally address more foundational and preliminary concerns in theology and technology. After an introductory essay by the original editors of the collection, Part 1 begins with two essays by Jacques Ellul on biblical hermeneutics. The first, "Technique and the Opening Chapters of Genesis," questions the commonly held understanding that work was a good part of edenic life and that humanity's vocation was to perfect creation. Ellul notes that the idea of progress is inappropriate in an already completed Eden. Rather, the work performed by humans was gratuitous and free. "It was work for nothing," he argues. Prelapsarian work, Ellul continues, was nonproductive and "hardly different from play" (31). Based on Ellul's understanding of technique, he concludes, "The entire world of techniques in all their application was completely foreign to Eden" (34). Rather there is a condition of communion with God and an openness to the creation in a relationship of love. The rupture of this communion by sin allows for the mediation of technique, which seeks maximum efficiency in extracting resources from creation.

His second essay, "The Relationship Between Man and Creation in the Bible," addresses similar themes. He narrows his focus to consider passages that have been used to justify humanity's exploitative relationship to creation. The rupture caused by sin, Ellul argues, replaces the mode of relating to the creation as a gift—along with the conditions implied by such a relationship—with a technological and extractive, colonialistic mode (46). The primary difference is one of ownership. If humanity is considered the owner then exploitation or abuse of creation is legitimate. If, however, God is the owner and creation belongs to people only secondarily and temporarily, then love for the owner "marks [the] limit" of its use (50). Finally, Ellul reminds the reader of Jesus's teaching that the meek will inherit the earth. He takes this to mean that those who receive creation as a gift and whose relationship with creation is tempered by the relationship of givenness will be given the earth, "because they will not destroy it but will respect it" (56).

In the final essay in the section on biblical studies, "Biblical Hermeneutics and the Critique of Technology," Charles Mabee challenges the reader to apply the biblical pattern of exposing and interpreting myths to the American myths. As a highly technological society, this approach brings the biblical critique of technology to bear on technological society, i.e. American. Mabee's essay closely aligns with Douglas John Hall's, which follows later in the collection. Mabee provides a biblical hermeneutic for a "benevolent demythologization" (62) of American myths which is taken up in Hall as a theology of the cross.

Part II is devoted to patristic and medieval theology. The best essay in this section is the first, "Notes on How to Begin to Think About Technology in a Theological Way" by P. Han Sun. This essay is unique in the whole collection in that it calls the reader to resist technology by embracing a life of prayer. Sun's approach is provocative and refreshingly simple. He asks, "What kind of technology is most compatible with prayer?" (79) In answering this question, he resonates with Ellul's emphasis on openness to gift or grace. He notes that the condition of the soul which allows for prayer is not achievable by technique. "This is not something you can do

for yourself," he writes; "It is only something that you can let be done to you—as you suffer the inscrutable action of God. From our point of view the only way is non-action, non-technique" (81).

The next three essays address issues related to the foundations of technology, e.g. classical understandings of techne, nature, and law. These essays require some prior understanding of the issues addressed in the classical texts to fully appreciate. Without such prior knowledge, it is difficult to discern what is at stake for a theology of technology in, for example, Aquinas's treatment of natural law. These essays seemed to me the weakest, and I suspect that other readers who also lack the esoteric prerequisite knowledge will feel similarly.

The final section, Part III, *Theology and Technological Culture*, addresses Theology and Technical Culture. This section begins with an essay called "Justice and Technology" by George Grant. The thesis of this essay is simply that in a technological age the ability to think about and love justice has been lost. The argument is fine as far as it goes, but it seems underdeveloped. Perhaps Grant meant his essay to be merely a prolegomena for further examination of the relationship between justice and technology. However, students of Ellul will likely want more from Grant. For example, Ellul might suggest that we can no longer think about or love justice because the good in a technological society is that which progresses toward the greatest efficiency.

Douglas John Hall's essay, "Toward an Indigenous Theology of the Cross," deserves much more sustained consideration than I can give here. He begins by criticizing American theology for being too concerned with commentating on European theology, for not developing indigenous, American, ways of doing theology. He goes on to suggest that an indigenous American theology must address technology since America was founded as a modernistic experiment to achieve a new kind of society founded on enlightenment principles. Therefore, American theology must address the dissolution with this project. He suggests that without an outside vantage point, the problems in a technological society will continue to be framed as technological problems, as systemic inefficiencies.

In the end, Hall suggests that a robust theology of the cross is needed to provide this vantage point. Against the triumphant theologies of resurrection, this theology of the cross will provide a sustained engagement with what Hall calls negation—the night. The goal, in Hall's words is to, "extricate the biblical confession of the divine triumph for man from the triumphalistic anthropology of Western bourgeois culture" (170).

Hall's essay remains relevant and provocative today. It should only be noted that to a large extent technologization is not uniquely American. Hall does not argue that other nations are not technologized, only that America is so more profoundly. Those conditions have likely shifted. I also wonder if theologians like Cornel West, with his emphasis on the cross and the tragic in American experience, have achieved the indigenous theology Hall envisioned.

The following essay by Thomas Berry, "A New Story," seeks to align scientific and religious cosmologies into a story about an emerging universe of "communion within the total order of the real" (185). If I have understood Berry correctly, his theory is very close to that of Teilhard de Chardin as expounded in Fudpucker's essay. I'll let my treatment of that essay stand here as well.

As a counterpoint to Berry, Frederick Sontag, in his essay, "Theodicy and Technology," problematizes the theology of de Chardin. He examines technology through the lens of theodicy and considers the increase of violence and evil in a technological age. As with many essays in the collection, the fundamental question is about God's relationship to human work. Sontag argues that science and technology can no longer be seen as salvific and theologies that align God with technology must be abandoned.

Albert Borgmann's conclusion essay, "Prospects for the Theology of Technology," is a wonderful commentary on the collection which demonstrates Borgmann's depth and clarity of thought. Additionally, he contributes his own critical framework to the conversation. Borgmann considers the fundamental opposition between technology and Christianity through the lens of commodification which reduces everything by removing their divinely given fullness, and reduces human capacity for a particular kind of

responsive presence in the world. He concludes with a call for a practical theology as Christians find ways of living that restrain the dominance of technology in our lives. As with many essays in this collection, the foundational question is about counterforces that might be called upon to limit technology, standards other than efficiency that can be brought to bear on technological progress.

Throughout this collection beauty, prayer, and responsibility for the health of creation have been considered as possible standards that can stand over and judge technology, tempering its triumphant march toward the greatest efficiency. I am most encouraged and challenged by Borgmann and Han's emphasis on Christian praxis, the recovery of prayer and ascesis. So long as meditation, prayer, beauty, nature are not recast as techniques—methods to achieve mental or emotional health or to become better people—they are appropriately humble, useless, actions that enact the paradoxical truth that the meek will inherit the earth.

Engaging with so many essays in summary means that I have not given adequate attention to any one. To conclude, I will say that his collection has been helpful for me to frame my study of Ellul among his contemporaries. And while a little Ellulian shoulder angel, or demon, was whispering in my ear as I read this collection—*Where's the dialectic? What about the eschatological?*—the collection helped me broaden my scope of thinking after years of primarily reading and trying to understand Ellul. I suspect that others who have taken up Ellul as their primary interlocutor might feel similarly, that reading and understanding his primary texts is a significant undertaking from which one needs to emerge to consider competing perspectives. This book is essential reading for anyone who wants to think well about the intersections of theology and technology. It is especially helpful for anyone with a wobbling stack of Ellul books on their desk who are needing to resurface and engage the wider world of technological criticism.

Review of Theory in the 'Post' Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons

Amy J. Erickson

Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian, *Theory in the 'Post' Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022, xii + 364pp. ISBN 978-1-501305895-1.

Whatever the ongoing uncertainties and perplexities that continue to vex our current age, one common consensus—and starting point for this collection of essays—is that it is awash in posts: post-colonialism, post-humanism, post-modernism, and even post-postmodernism, just to name a few. This edited volume, which brings to the Anglophone world the perspectives of sixteen Romanian scholars, aims to set a light beam into the brackish waters of these posts to see what signs of emerging (literary critical) theory get caught in the glare. Their collective contention is that "theory needs community" (x), and that for all the contemporary contestations and fluctuations, there remains yet a globalized promise for the development of a "world genre" of literary criticism and theory.

At the risk of marring this review with authorial intrusion, a disclaimer seems appropriate: I teach theology at a small Anglican seminary in the southern hemisphere. One of my graduate classes is in theological hermeneutics, a field which often engages and absorbs the fashionable literary and hermeneutical tools of the day. I asked to review this title because both my students and I have asked one another in class the very question which propels it: "what's next?" Yet my training remains grounded by—and limited to—theology, which this work is resolutely not. In some regards I am not its target audience, and in many ways this volume remains out of my depth. But Jacques Ellul is a guiding light whose own cross-disciplinary

Erickson, Amy J. Review of *Theory in the 'Post' Era: A Vocabulary for the Twenty-First-Century Conceptual Commons* , by Alexandru Matei, Christian Moraru, and Andrei Terian. *Ellul Forum* 71 (Spring 2023): 73-77.

engagements—those between theology and contemporary hermeneutical and literary theory especially (see for example Jacob Marques Rollison's *A New Reading of Jacques Ellul* for a careful theological analysis of Ellul's engagement with the French poststructuralists of his day),[1] inspires me to step somewhat out of my bounds. It is of the interest of any servant of the Word to also serve as a student of the prevailing patterns of handling words in one's present era.

Any edited volume poses a challenge to the reviewer to adequately account for its breadth with any adequate depth. My strategy is to begin with rapid-fire sentence summaries of the sixteen main chapters before indicating guiding themes and closing with evaluative comments. The chapters are grouped into three parts: aesthetics (chs 1–6), temporalities (chs 7–11), and critical modes (chs 12–16). (That beauty, time, and criticism are taken as orienting themes is of course in itself telling of the sensibilities which animate these authors and their instincts regarding emerging theoretical practice).

Teodora Dumitru's "Constructalism: Literary Evolution as Multiscalar Design" (ch 1) seeks to adapt the emerging physics theory known as "constructalism"—which contends that the flow of both animate and inanimate matter tends to follow an arboreal (or tree-like) pattern—for current critical practice. Alexandru Matei's "Post-Aesthetics: Literature, Ontology, and Criticism as Diplomacy" (ch 2) proposes a "diplomatic" "post-aesthetic" which organically appreciates the material worlds from which artistic objects emerge. Alex Goldiș's "Eastethics: The Ideological Shift in Narratology" (ch 3) maintains, by drawing examples from communist-era Romanian novelists' efforts to avoid censorship while being politically subversive, that narrative genres are inflected by their political context in ways that reconfigure simplistic notions of the reading contract between authors and readers. Ioana Macrea-Toma's "Metapolitics: Recommitting Literature in the Populist Aftermath" (ch 4) explores ways that Romanian and non-Romanian literature resists simplistic nationalist and populist discourse as well as flattened progressive virtue-signaling. Andrei Terian's "Communality: Un-Disciplining Race, Class, and Sex in the Wake of Anti-'PC' Monomania" (ch 5) indicates that the solution to resisting various conservative

ideologies (racism, classism, sexism) is not by developing counter-discourses, but discursive communities. Corin Braga's "Anarchetype: Reading Aesthetic Form after 'Structure'" (ch 6) proposes that the term "anarchetype" might helpfully account for the proliferation of literature which does not self-consciously aim to follow any set archetypical literary forms.

Turning to Part 2, "Temporalities": Carmen Mușat's "Post-synchronism: 'Cultural Complex,' or Critical Theory's Unfinished Business" (ch 7) explores how geography—even fictionalized forms (e.g. Dracula's Transylvania)—shapes self-perception and power relations among cultural spheres. Bogdan Crețu's "Post-presentism: The Past, the Passed, and 'Now' as Critical Operator" (ch 8) excavates the various forms of "presentism" that continue to influence contemporary criticism, including support of nationalist ideologies that instrumentalize the past for populist agendas. It closes with a "case for a new presentism" that permits present values to set the interrogative agenda of a given text. Christian Moraru's "Postfuturism: Contemporaneity, Truth, and the End of World Literature" (ch 9) considers novels that explore alternative histories to indicate that modernity's progressive view of history and humanity has come to an end. Andreea Mironescu's "Post-Memory: The Labor of Critical Remembrance after Communism" (ch 10) surveys how Romanian interactions with the US became a seedbed for the development of the understanding of cultural memory post-1989. Laura Cernat's "Biofiction: Metamorphoses of Life-Writing across Criticism, Theory, and Literature" (ch 11)'s contends that biofiction (fictionalized biographies) "subverts established literary hierarchies" (216) while serving as a promising resource by which contemporary literary sets its own agenda for analysis.

Finally, Part 3 "Critical Modes" begins with Ștefan Baghiu's "Geocritique: Siting, Poverty, and the Global Southeast" (ch 12), critically engages geocritcism (which promotes rethinking around the relation between geographical space and fictionalized worlds) to encourage conceptualizing in terms of "interrelated places" instead of "discrete spaces" (e.g. alignment between the literary interests of Romania and the Global South). Mihai Iovănel's "Neocritique: Sherlock Holmes Investigates Literature" (ch 13) critically engages and aims to repair hermeneutics of suspicion with recourse to Sherlock Holmes' development as a multi-authored literary figure,

promoting a less suspicious and more adventurous hermeneutical posture. Adriana Stan's "Digicritism: Profession On(the)Line" (ch 14) considers how digital means of dissemination is altering how texts are received, especially by popularizing less academic forms of criticism. Caius Dobrescu's "Somatography: Writing as Incorporated Cognition, or The Body Knows More" (ch 15) contends that key Romanian thinkers chart a constructive middle way between unitive and non-unitive (anti-entitarian) views of the body that likewise break down binaries between textual and material bodies. Cosmin Borza's "Post-Canonicity: Curating World Literary Archives after Postmodernism" (ch 16) indicates that traditional canons may continue to be constructively assessed without either being completely dismissed nor overly determinative. The volume lacks and could have merited from a concluding chapter to summarize and synthesize the contributions and indicate further directions.

The dizzying terseness of these summaries is indicative that much, of course, has been glossed over. If I could hazard a summarizing statement from this rather eclectic offering, it would be this one from ch 11: "theory no longer is these days—if it has ever been—an analysis instrument external to literature but an integral part of the latter's dynamics" (215). Indeed, many of the chapters (4, 9, 11, and 13 stand out), implicitly or explicitly indicate that it is the job of literature to set the agenda for its own analysis. One wonders if this method conflates the descriptive with the prescriptive. On the other hand, one also wonders if this only indicates what has always been the case: that contemporary hermeneutics tend to be shaped by the same zeitgeist by which contemporary texts are themselves composed. Or perhaps, after a long (mostly Western) hermeneutical journey spanning the sophisticated earthiness of Jewish sages as well as the towering semiotic influence of Augustine to the preening ivory-towers of hermeneutics of suspicion, structuralists, and post-structuralists alike followed by the fragmenting and subversive identity-based interpretive practices, we have finally landed into a spacious theoretical clearing in which texts should simply be read on their own unique terms without flattening out by preconceived lenses. Whatever the case, according to this volume, post theory—it seems—is marked by letting texts shape theory, and not the other way around.

It's a contention that, for all the thorny detail and occasionally overwrought

and underbaked claims of individual contributions, seems simple and innocuous enough. But when reframed by the introduction's contention that theory today is a "world genre," and by the ostensible aim of the volume to develop a common "vocabulary", two criticisms emerge, one sociological and the other theological (and both, I think, Ellulian). First: though haunted by the spectre of rising populism and nationalism, the volume nevertheless proceeds with an unverified confidence that globalized progressivism will nevertheless prevail. That this volume was published in September 2021, five months before Russia launched its most recent war against Ukraine—and Romania's backyard—puts this saccharine optimism on ice. Second, specifically with reference to the volume's grand aim of developing (an apparently global) vocabulary: a theologian cannot help but think of another, biblical tale about a people's aim to share a common construction by means of a common tongue. The name of that construction was Babel, and it is the recourse of theologians like Ellul to conclude that it is the destiny of any project outside the kenotic and salvific work of Christ to suffer the same fate. (For more on this matter, see the Ellul Forum's own Ted Lewis' "The Tower of Babel and the Hymn of Kenosis" in *Jacques Ellul and the Bible*).[2] Together, both criticisms suggest that this volume's overriding vision to develop (rather curiously, even if not quite self-defeatingly, from one main national perspective) a globalized, if not quite homogenized, language of literary criticism is both too naïve and utopian. Yet whatever its weaknesses, this volume may prove relevant to literary scholars and theologians with hermeneutical concerns, to say nothing of the individual chapters which may pique an array of academic interests

Notes

1 Jacob Marques Rollison, A New Reading of Jacques Ellul: Presence in the Postmodern World (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2020).

2 Ted Lewis, "Chapter 21: The Tower of Babel and the Hymn of Kenosis: Counterpoint Texts for Ellul," in Jacques Ellul and the Bible: Towards a Hermeneutic of Freedom, ed. Jacob Marques Rollison (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 218–33.

Review of *Following Jesus in a Digital Age*

Jack Esselink

Thacker, Jason. *Following Jesus in a Digital Age*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2022.

What does it mean to follow Jesus in a digital age? This is the question many Christians are asking, but too few resources to date seek to answer this question. Jason Thacker, the chair of Research in Technology at the ERLC Research Institute, has moved the conversation forward in his book, Following Jesus in a Digital Age. *According to Thacker, the main goal of his work is "to [help] better understand that we are each being discipled every day by the technologies we use, whether we realize it or not" (3) and to establish ways of thinking about how we can navigate our digital society in a "moral, holistic, and deeply biblical way" (6). The concise book contains four thematic chapters devoted to wisdom, truth, responsibility, and identity followed by an appendix that contains a note to church leaders.*

The first chapter asks the question, *What does it mean to follow Jesus wisely in a digital age?* Wisdom starts with taking a step back to reflect on how technology is shaping us in our daily lives. Thacker draws on the work of Jacques Ellul to demonstrate how humans and technology have been in a complex relationship since the beginning of the world. The mindset in our 21st century society is that we should be able to solve every problem with technology (i.e. 'there's an app for that'). This technological mode of being has led to the permeation of technology in nearly every aspect of our daily lives. Our world, and therefore our worldview, has become increasingly mediated through technology. Ellul wrote about this *technological imperative* to pursue efficiency and progress in his book *The Technological Society* more than seventy years ago and his analysis still holds today. In the last part of this chapter, Thacker describes what it means to be wise as he understands wisdom to be depicted in the biblical Wisdom literature. Being wise is not to walk the path of technology towards more efficiency, but to reorient oneself to a full flourishing life as God intended. Christians, Thacker concludes, are all called to show wisdom in the digital public square.

Esselink, Jack. *Review of Following Jesus in a Digital Age*. *Ellul Forum* 71 (Spring 2023): 78-81.

The second chapter is about pursuing *truth*. According to Thacker, the root cause of the current post-truth era is not technology, but the scientific worldview that removed transcendency from society; we have moved from a God-centric world to a self-centered world where truth has been personalized and weaponized as propaganda. This shift has led to a world that is inundated with dis- and misinformation which has been amplified and accelerated by technology. With the advent of new AI-powered technologies like deepfakes, our relationship to the truth is likely to worsen as Thacker expects. He calls upon Christians to act wisely and pursue the truth and be accountable for one's own behaviour in dealing with mis- and disinformation.

Being *responsible* in a curated age is the theme of the third chapter where Thacker advocates for heightened awareness of the content being presented through digital means. In what I consider to be one of the best sections of the book, Thacker explains the rationale of content moderation by big tech companies and how they often fail to account for minority views. He notes the clear impact content moderation has on the expression of Christian values that deviate from society's values.

In the final chapter, Thacker argues that Christians should take personal responsibility for their actions and not blame technology or "the other" when online dialogue becomes polarized where different groups in society define themselves as polar opposites of the other and conversations about "cultural issues are littered with warlike language" (105). One of the root causes for this polarization, according to Thacker, is the desire to build online identities through digital communities that give a sense of belonging, purpose, and safety. In response to polarization, Thacker challenges Christians to take a long and biblical view of life. By this Thacker means that Christians must find their sense of identity in Christ which establishes

them in the church, a place of embodied belonging that cannot be shaken (135). This ultimately means Christians become less polarized and more unified; therefore, they become a unifying presence in the world.

Despite the author's acknowledgement of some positive uses of technology, this book may give readers an unsettling, dystopian view of the role technology is playing in our society. This feeling will be familiar to many who have read Ellul's Technological Society. Ellul's deterministic view on technology has been widely criticized[1] but as Jacob Van Vleet rightly argues, to fully understand Ellul, "one must read selections from both sides of his work. One must engage both the theological and the sociological dialectically."[2]

In a unique feature of *Following Jesus in a Digital Age*, Thacker engages dialectically with Biblical wisdom literature, seeking from this dialogue help for Christians who are trying to understand their position in a digital world. It would have been more impactful if the author would have engaged more fully across Ellul's dialectical project and considered his theological work, e.g. *Presence in the Modern World*, to drive home the message of what it means to be a Christian in a technological world. In agreement with Ellul's claim about *The Technological Society*—"this book is an appeal to the individual's sense of responsibility"[3]—Thacker's intention for writing his book is to make Christians think proactively about the role technology plays in their lives and take personal responsibility for it. Thacker clearly exposes the primary drivers of technology in our digital society and uncovers, like Ellul, the implicit values that are baked into technology and shape our worldview. In the section of the book that deals with truth, Thacker quotes Ellul only once. He quotes Ellul's statement that propaganda has "become as natural as air or food" (50)[4] in our technological society. This lack of rigorous engagement with Ellul is a pity as Ellul's work on propaganda would have been a great complementary resource. In general, Thacker could have benefited from much more engagement with Ellul's work in this book.

Thacker's book is a good and practical handbook which combines Ellul's perspectives on technology with biblical wisdom; however, I think his perspective on technology is too pessimistic. Christians may also be thankful for the gift of technology in their lives, and I would have liked to have seen

this point more emphasized. I would recommend any church leader, theologian and preacher who wants to develop a balanced and realistic point of view on technology to read this book in conversation—*dialectically*—with another work that focuses more on how technology could be used for good. Nonetheless, *Following Jesus in a Digital Age* clearly shows that Ellul's work on technology is still very relevant in our 21st century society.

Notes

1 See e.g., Peter-Paul Verbeek, What Things Do : Philosophical Reflections on Technology, Agency, and Design, (University Park PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 174.

2 Jacob Van Vleet, Jacques Ellul: A Companion to His Major Works, (Eugene OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2020),2.

3 Jacques Ellul, The Technological Society, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), XXXIII.

4 Thacker quotes Ellul from The Technological Society, 366.

About the Contributors

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Matt Prior has been ordained in the Church of England since 2005 and has been Lecturer in Ethics at St. Mellitus College since August 2019. He is interested in the interface between technology and theology, both in terms of offering a coherent theological account of technology, the subject of his doctorate (through Trinity College Bristol) on Ellul, published in 2020 as *Confronting Technology: The Theology of Jacques Ellul*, and of exploring theology and ethics in an age of rapid technological development. He has a BA and MA in Theology (University of Bristol) and a BA in Modern and Medieval Languages (University of Cambridge). He is married to Esther, who grew up in Zimbabwe, and so he has been a regular visitor to Southern Africa over the past 20 years.

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Jacob Marques Rollison is an independent researcher working at the L'Abri Fellowship in Switzerland. His PhD studies at the University of Aberdeen focused on Ellul's theological ethics. He is the author of *A New Reading of Jacques Ellul: Presence in the Postmodern World*, and translator of Ellul's two-volume introduction to Christian ethics, *To Will & To Do*. With Jacob Van Vleet, he is co-author of *Jacques Ellul: A Companion to his Major Works*.

Jason Hudson is a husband, father, pastor, and an aspiring homesteader. His PhD work compared the writings of Jacques Ellul and Wendell Berry, and brought their critiques into conversation with contemporary approaches to technology in Western Evangelical worship. He still has much wisdom to draw from the deep wells found in these two prolific authors, and he looks forward to reading them with a host of new interlocutors as a lifelong project.

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Jack Esselink is a theologian and AI specialist with over 25 years of experience in IT. He combines his expertise in technology with an abiding interest in theology. Holding an MA in Theology from the VU University in Amsterdam, Jack's work seeks to bridge the gap between spirituality and artificial intelligence.

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About the International Jacques Ellul Society

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

The objectives of IJES are threefold:

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

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

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

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