

The **Ellul** Forum

Number 69 Spring 2022



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About

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

Subscriptions

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Submissions

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

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Subversion through Weakness: Marva Dawn's Contribution to Ellul's Study of Modern Powers

Ted Lewis

"Just try to imagine that the Pattern is called a 'Lamb.' That alone is a scandal to the natural mind. Who has any desire to be a lamb?"—Soren Kierkegaard¹

The manipulation of information is a constant hallmark of modern times. Whenever the management of news media aims to manufacture consent or dissent, power dynamics are close at hand. And power dynamics rely on elements that are unseen, undetectable. On a material level there are images and words, writers and computers, sound bites and articles, media outlets and audiences. But what of the less-observable forces that operate in and around, perhaps behind or above, all these phenomena? How, for example, does one locate the force of a lie that spreads, a deception that beguiles? How do we understand the nature and influence of strong powers within social institutions that seemingly sway the opinions and behaviors of people?

With Jacques Ellul, Marva Dawn had a strong belief in the mysterious powers of the world that hide within institutional structures and influence people. *Powers* in this context refer to the New Testament *exousiai* as often referenced in the letters of Paul; associated terms include *principalities*, *dominions*, *authorities*, and *rulers*.² Beyond the epistles, the powers would include Mammon, Babylon, and Death itself. Ellul and Dawn agreed that such powers draw extra strength from being sacralized; conversely, to desacralize the powers was to disarm them of their power. As Christians, both

Ellul and Dawn believed that a decisive event in human history already happened to defeat all such powers. Both cosmically and historically the powers “have been destroyed and extirpated by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”³

But, many rightly ask, was this cosmic event all for nothing, “since nothing in ‘real’ life and time seems to be changed for the better?”⁴ Moreover, how can a show of messianic weakness, indeed a death, bring about a decisive victory over societal gods such as Money, Nationalism, Moralism, Scientism, and Technique? And what’s the point of speaking of a spiritual dimension when social forces seem to be explainable by social analyses alone? In short, is it really necessary for Ellul and Dawn to believe that powers wielding social influence have ontological being beyond empirical reality?

In many ways, Marva Dawn, in life and writing, exemplified the paradoxical relation between power and weakness. She was beset with lifelong maladies, and yet she exhibited immense strength to overcome her physical limitations. One could almost say she carried on with an invisible spiritual strength.

Some days I’m thoroughly exhausted from all the strain of trying to manage with arthritic hands, a crippled leg, a blind eye, a deaf ear, kidneys functioning around 17 percent, dead intestinal and stomach nerves resulting in no peristalsis, pain left over from cancer and jaw surgeries, the imminent possibility of losing vision in my remaining eye, and a leg brace causing sores that may lead to eventual amputation. And this isn’t the whole list. Does God really need me to be this weak?⁵

Her astonishing answer: “Yes!” Without weakness, she explained, God’s strength cannot be manifested. So here is the paradox in a nutshell. A woman who was a walking definition of *weakness* makes a lifelong study of *powers*. Understandably, she was drawn to Ellul throughout her adult life because Ellul himself understood the paradoxical nature of powers that could ultimately be defeated in a spiritual dimension. With René Girard, Ellul knew that powers rely on hidden mechanisms. Consequently, the defeat of powers cannot rest merely on a direct social or material confron-

tation. They need to be countered in all of their subtle complexity, which includes an unseen spiritual dimension.

This essay will explore the contributions that Dawn made to Ellul's treatment of modern powers, moving chronologically through Dawn's life as a writer and highlighting the maturing development of her thinking about the powers in three of her works: "The Concept of 'The Principalities and Powers' in the Works of Jacques Ellul," her PhD dissertation (1992); *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage* (1997), which provides translations of and commentary on these articles; and *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* (2001), in which she synthesized her earlier thinking.

Since this issue of the *Ellul Forum* also contains part of the first two of these works, I will focus here on the unique contributions of the third work.

What Exactly Are the Powers?

Under the guidance of John Howard Yoder at the University of Notre Dame, Dawn set out in the mid 1980s to study Ellul's understanding of the Bible's language of "the powers." Behind the focused question of what Ellul's position, or better, positions, on the powers were, Dawn was probing a prior question: What exactly *are* the powers? This study inevitably led her to explicate the modern debates over the interpretation of biblical terminology. After a first chapter that surveys the existing scholarly literature on the powers, including the contributions of Barth, Bultmann, Wilder, and Wink, Dawn moves into the body of her dissertation, which is a review and critique of Ellul's treatment of the powers in his prolific writings.

Central to Dawn's dissertation is the "hermeneutical gap" between the original meaning of biblical terms and contemporary application. Dawn's review of the main efforts to address this gap include the demythologizing of powers with respect to changing worldviews (Bultmann), the demythologizing of powers with respect to false deification (Barth), the correspondence of ancient and modern powers with respect to common structures (Stringfellow), and traditional views pertaining to the demonic and volitional *being* of powers (Stott). Walter Wink presents a fifth interpretation:

The powers are simultaneously the outer and inner aspects of one and the same indivisible concretion of power. [...] Instead of the old dualism of matter and spirit, we can now regard matter and spirit as united in one indivisible reality, distinguishable in two discrete but interrelated manifestations.⁶

Dawn is critical of Wink's view; this reductionism, for her, minimizes the biblical attention to the cosmic battle with the powers. This is an important concept for her since her criticism of Ellul's treatment is often along the same lines.

The stage is thus set for Dawn to show how Ellul's dialectical approach to the powers, through sociological and theological study, provides a more compelling way to address the hermeneutical gap. Her primary thesis is that "the concept of 'principalities and powers' provides a bridge between Ellul's two major tracks of thinking and a key for interpreting his work."⁷ Since Ellul's writings on the powers are scattered through his corpus, Dawn aspires "to bring some ordering into the montage of ideas"(8) that thread through his scriptural, sociological, and ethical writings. These three genres correspond respectively to Ellul's study of the being of the powers, the functioning of the powers, and the Christian response to the powers, which Dawn treats in successive chapters of the dissertation.

But Dawn is not without her criticisms. She is acutely aware that Ellul's views on the powers are not consistent throughout his writings. In her dedicated sleuthing style, she leaves no stone unturned as she critiques Ellul's inconsistencies and overstatements. In his later writings (she references *The Subversion of Christianity*), Ellul's comments "seem to parallel Wink's notion of the confluence of the inner and outer aspects of power, though in many of his earlier works Ellul posits a separable difference between the evil spiritual power and the human structure which it uses" (99). Three articles in *Foi & Vie* are exemplary for Dawn of a foundational view that is closer to her own.⁸

Dawn's critique is twofold: Ellul's biblical exegesis is inconsistent and incomplete, and his ontology of the powers, especially in his later writings, does not measure up, in her estimate, to a biblical viewpoint. (See Ellul's personal correspondence to Dawn in 1987 about the *nature* of the powers,

in this issue of the *Forum*.) But where Ellul is lacking, he is well compensated by her admiration for his insights on how the powers *function* in modern society. “His major contribution is the fact that he dialectically brings illumination from all sides” (367). One nice example of how Dawn plumbs the depths of Ellul’s writings is the section titled “Language as the Deception of the Powers.” She keenly recognizes that a 360-degree analysis of modern problems includes multiple disciplines.

At the end of her review of Ellul’s sociological works, Dawn points out the dilemma of Ellul the sociologist when he describes the problem at length, but, in true Weberian fact-versus-value fashion, withholds the solution. Ellul himself was fully aware of this tension, as reflected in his preface to *The Technological Society* where he admits to arousing the reader without suggesting a plan of remedy. Furthermore, he is averse to any ethical *system* or *agenda*. But fortunately, as Dawn anticipates, Ellul’s ethical writings come to the rescue. The dissertation’s final two chapters review Ellul’s dialectical approach that calls Christians and people of conscience to be “sentinels” against the powers of evil. To do this, today’s prophet must see “from all sides” how the powers operate. In this way, they can best understand how “these forces are more than human and must be counteracted with weapons of the spirit” (375).

Dawn’s dissertation is truly a vital survey of Ellul’s treatment of the biblical powers language. By focusing more on the *ontology* of the powers than their *functionality* (with the latter being Ellul’s strong suit), Dawn creates a secondary discussion that does not completely center on Ellul’s primary concerns. While both agree that the powers are indeed powerful in society because they have a spiritual dimension, and both agree that acts of resistance are necessary expressions of an “ethic of freedom,” Dawn centers her concerns on whether Ellul’s use of “spiritual” terminology aligns well with biblical categories.

Spiritual and Social Sources and Trajectories

Having recognized in her doctoral study that Ellul’s views on the *nature* of the powers had somewhat shifted from earlier to later writings, and having found greater affinity with his earlier orientation, it is no surprise that

Dawn took up the task of translating eight of Ellul's articles that resonated best with her own perspective. They were chosen "because they are the earliest formulations of some of Ellul's key ideas."⁹ Dawn references a speech by Ivan Illich who reinforced the foundational quality of Ellul's early writings. Having dipped into twenty-some books by Ellul, Illich said, "I was astounded by the freshness and vivacity with which [...] Ellul continually recaptures the fundamental intuitions of his earliest work, always clarifying them more."¹⁰

Dawn's selection of all of the articles shows her intentions. They all "reveal both sides of Ellul's (dialectical) work and the ways in which, at the beginning, he tied them together" (3). Bookending every essay are Dawn's commentaries: "Sources" at the front end, "Trajectories" at the back. They serve well to show how her ideas were developing in the mid 1990s. We no longer see her previous and somewhat impatient critiques of Ellul; we see her contextualizing Ellul in ways that allow him to be best understood. For the purposes of this essay, I will focus on two of the articles: "Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization I: By Way of a Brief Preface," and "Christian Faith and Social Reality."¹¹

It is significant that Ellul wrote "Chronicle" while serving as an elected representative at the municipal level, a position he left a year and a half later. In the post-war milieu of shifting realities, Ellul recognized the need to go beyond "exterior forms" to understand their "deeper reality." "We want to combat social injustice, and that is very good, and we want to connect it to an economic system," he said, "but we do not penetrate the true structures of this system" (14). He advocated for a "descent into hell," that is, a strike to the roots, in order to critically understand the real complexities of current problems. At stake, for the young Ellul, was the survival of a "civilization which is perhaps not far from total collapse" (16).

Ellul proceeds to make some astonishing theological claims about God's role in preserving human life and virtue in the world, and about the opposing death-path that the world is on without God. He then speaks of creating an inventory of forces that "give to our time its radical character" (20). These forces, "beyond their social and economic forms" condition the life of our times (19). There is a profound separation between the materi-

al and spiritual realms in modern times, he bemoans. “The separation of realms prohibits going further, and particularly seeking spiritual causes and foundations [...] as is essential” (20).

Everyone wishes to act, comments Ellul. Instead, he calls Christians to live according to three unique guidelines:

1. Do not act according to the modes of the present age.
2. Good action depends on good theological thought.
3. It matters less to *do* than to *be*; action comes from being. (22)

Certainly we see the same themes in *Presence in the Modern World*.¹² But Dawn’s eye is primarily on the nascent dialectic between social and spiritual dimensions that ultimately informs the hermeneutical key to all of Ellul’s works. In her “Trajectories,” she notes that her first introduction to Ellul’s engagement with the biblical language of the powers was in reading this passage in *The Ethics of Freedom*:

On the one side, I am fully convinced [...] that the New Testament *exousiai* and the power of money personified as Mammon correspond to authentic, if spiritual, realities which are independent of [human] decision. [...] On the other side, however, the powers do not act simply from outside after the manner of Gnostic destiny or a *deus ex machina*. They are characterized by their relocation to the concrete world of [human beings]. According to the biblical references they find expression in human, social realities.¹³

As in her dissertation, Dawn is still focused on the degree to which Ellul posits ontological being to the powers. As she tunes into phrases in “Chronicles” such as the need to seek “spiritual causes and foundations” regarding modern problems, Dawn quotes from *The Ethics of Freedom* (with her own italicization for emphasis):

Political power has many dimensions, e.g., social, economic, psychological, ethical, psychoanalytical, and legal. But when we have scrutinized them all, we have still not apprehended its reality. *I am not speaking hastily or lightly here but as one who has passed most of his life in confrontation with their question and in their power.* We cannot say with Marx that the power is an ideological superstructure, for it is always there. *The disproportion noted above leads me to the unavoidable conclusion that another power intervenes and indwells and uses political*

*power, thus giving it a range and force that it does not have in itself. The same is true of money [...] and] technology.*¹⁴

Another power intervenes. This is a telling phrase. It certainly aligns with Ellul's emphasis to add spiritual diagnostics to material/social diagnostics when analyzing modern problems. But it does not help to illuminate what Ellul means when he periodically uses the term *spiritual*. Dawn, perhaps more than any other scholar, found a way to affirm Ellul's dialectical approach while also critiquing his incomplete and inconsistent description of the invisible realm of institutional power and force.

Dawn makes a strong case for the continuity of Ellul's two-track dialectical framework that unites his earliest writings with his later "mature" writings.¹⁵ From start to finish, Ellul argued that social analysis is lacking if it does not penetrate the trans-empirical *force* dimension of all political and economic structures. Dawn recognizes how and why Ellul refrains from using biblical terminology of supernatural categories when addressing the "academic milieu of *sociologie*,"¹⁶ namely, the audience of his sociology students, colleagues, and readers. Nonetheless, she highlights how Ellul's biblical framework of the "principalities and powers" is an "important key for interpreting his work" (26).

Desacralizing the Spiritual Dimension of Idols

Ellul gave two lectures that were later printed in the *Free University Quarterly*. One of these, "Technique and Civilization," echoed sociological themes that were more fully worked out in *The Technological Society*. Dawn chose to include in *Sources* the other lecture, "Christian Faith and Social Reality," which spoke to the other half of Ellul's dialectical methodology: the spiritual diagnosis and prognosis that called for biblically informed action. One of the reasons that I am including it in this survey of Dawn's ideas about the powers is that she misses an important opportunity to unpack a key aspect of Ellul's use of the term *spiritual*. This lecture introduces the idolatrous nature of the powers (developed more fully in later writings such as *The Humiliation of the Word* and *The Subversion of Christianity*). In my estimation, the idolatrous aspects of the powers provide the best gateway

to understanding Ellul's perspective on how invisible intervening powers make use of political or economic powers.

After making a distinction between *truth* and *reality* (which I will return to below), Ellul suggests that Christians stand in a unique place to see "all dimensions" of social reality. "Seeing the whole," due to being "not completely caught up inside it," they can develop a "synthetic vision."¹⁷ Dawn critiques Ellul for making this endeavor an exclusive task for Christians. "Indeed, others are able to point out false values and myths in society, even as other groups can work for peace" (182). More than once does she point this out in her book. Nevertheless, she does agree with Ellul that Christians, while holding the powers in a "creative disequilibrium," have a unique calling as a communal body to oppose the powers and be a sign of God's powerful truth through their witness (175).

The key word that comes next in Ellul's lecture is *desacralization*. The rejection of true religion (i.e., revelatory Christian truth) leads society to fabricate more idols, myths, and false values, all of which are transformed back into religious values. Of course, for Ellul, this very transformation also happens within Christianity; his books *False Presence of the Kingdom* and *The Subversion of Christianity* expound on this matter. Whether idols are Christianized or secularized, Ellul calls for iconoclasm. "By smashing the religious character of this or that, we liberate human beings [...] from their intellectual alienations and their spiritual alienations" (176). The use of the word *spiritual* in this context helps us to see how Ellul is dealing not with a separate realm distinct from social reality but rather with a participatory realm within social reality. Surprisingly, Dawn does not draw attention to the flow of Ellul's thought here.

Participatory spirituality, with idols and myths, involves an element of irrationality; irrationality invites lies and deceptions. Ellul speaks of a "reasonable world," which today's seer illuminates. People are to be called back to reason, to understand things as they really are, things unto themselves without sacralization. If the State, for example, is just a matter of papers, files, typewriters, and offices, "we are much less ready to sacrifice the lives of human beings to it" (177). But when the State is divinized with myth and doctrine and sacred pomp and ceremony, it is very much a force that

compels human sacrifice. This generative *gravitational pull* that acts upon a population, you could say, is how Ellul understands the spiritual dimension of modern powers. The same applies to Money, Technique, and the idea of Progress, but their sacralizations are more subtle and less overt than that of the State.

We are now in a better position to understand how his distinction between *truth* and *reality* bears upon his view of the powers. In my thinking, it all hinges on the power of the lie; deception is the very essence of powers that sustains their grandiosity. Today, says Ellul, we have forgotten the distinction between truth and reality “because science claims to bring us the truth.” For Ellul, “science agrees with reality finally” (169). Nevertheless,

We all know this intellectual position: one can do nothing against the truth, which will always triumph. I am not sure that the truth always triumphs; the lie has an extraordinary power. And the truth, if it is not brought to life by a human brain and human hands, has no force in itself. In other words, reality will never lead us to the truth, but the truth is nothing if it does not enter into a certain reality. (169)

Here we see Ellul’s incarnational approach to truth and reality. Truth is not to be subsumed by reality but rather enters and enlivens it. But we also learn from this text how the lie is instrumental in the conflation of truth with the social or material realities of society. The lie allows science, for example, to be transcendent as unquestionable truth, and in that new context, Science (now with a capital S) generates a spiritual force within society, becoming a source of authority.

It is not enough for Christians and people of good conscience to unmask the lies and debunk the idols. Ellul concludes with a clear call for Christians to be a *sign* of living out God’s truth without participating under the influence of the powers. By not sacrificing to the god Mammon, Christians exemplify simple economies of sharing. By not sacrificing to the deities of coercive power, Christians engage within all groups and movements (without full alignment) in order to “reduce oppositions in society.” A negative refusal is matched by a positive witness.

In this way, Christians live out their calling to be light, salt, and sheep in the world.¹⁸ Dawn again remarks that Ellul overstates his case by saying that only Christians can do this work of building relationships, building bridges, connecting with enemies (182). But her larger critique is that Ellul, throughout his corpus, did not fully develop the idea that Christian bridge-building stems out of a vibrant church community, which itself becomes an imperfect jar of clay through which the light of God's truth can shine. It would take her another book to flesh out this vision.

The Church Reborn in Weakness

A simple way to describe how Dawn's developing views made an advancement on Ellul's view of the powers is as follows: Whereas Ellul was interested in the Christian's individual vocation to resist the powers, Dawn was interested in the Church's communal vocation to resist the powers. She also gave more attention to the Church's calling to live out alternative Kingdom values than to its calling to oppose and disarm the powers of earthly kingdoms. Doing the former proactively is itself a form of resistance. Alternative action is by default subversive. But at the center of this vocation is the Church's unique capacity to embrace weakness. This for Dawn is the hallmark of her own theology: God's power can be manifested best through the weakness of Christians who no longer act out of their own power.

Her book *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacling of God* can be read as a maturation of the views first laid out in her dissertation and later developed in *Sources and Trajectories*. I will aim to provide a brief summary and highlight the way that she engages Ellul's writings. Then I will show how her "theology of weakness" offers an important addition to Ellul's overall treatment of the principalities and powers in our modern context.

The first part of her book, echoing the early chapters of her dissertation, reviews the scholarly literature on the powers. She critiques Walter Wink at length for reducing the powers to the "*interiority* of earthly institutions, systems and structures" (Wink's phrase, Dawn's italics).¹⁹ She favors views that elevate the cosmic-battle aspect of the powers as reflected in Ephesians 6. She also favors the perspective of Heinrich Schlier as quoted by Thomas Yoder Neufeld:

[The powers] are not “blood and flesh.” [They are] too slippery to grasp, with no specific names, only collective designations. They are superior to humans from the outset through their superior position “in the heavenlies,” superior through their invisibility and their unsailability. After all, their position is an all pervasive “atmosphere” of existence which they themselves generate.²⁰

Neufeld then states how “this characterization of the powers prevents a choice between sociologically and politically identifiable “powers” and those perceived as “spiritual” and thus described mythologically. Both are intended” (123–24). Significant for Dawn is that the powers also have a “supra-human” dimension.

Similarly, Dawn likes Barth’s language of the powers as “spirits with a life and activity of their own, lordless indwelling forces”²¹ with both a reality and efficacy that are (her paraphrasing) “obscure, ambivalent, and unintelligible.” Since it is by means of these mystifying mythic qualities that the powers are able to enslave people, Barth rightly highlights the biblical task of demythologizing the powers. For this is precisely what the cross of Christ has already done: exposed the powers for what they are and disarmed them of their spiritual power.²²

At stake for Dawn is how Christians perceive the powers. If Christians are not able to “estimate rightly the capacities of the powers” (22) to sway and beguile people, her fear is that the Church will itself act like a fallen power, thus failing to be a humble vessel through which God’s power may work. Instead, the Church will live by its own power, to become, as Ellul called it, a *false presence* in the world, either through State collusion, separatistic quietism, or accommodating solidarity. Since Christ has already defeated the powers, the Church inherits a unique position. “The defeat of the powers is understood as a past fact, a present experience, and a future hope.”²³ In this light, Christians “recognize that the powers are like runaway horses that must be controlled. They are unmasked, stripped of their semi-divinity, and humbled through Christ’s victory,” which is worked out in the daily lives of Christians (30).

All of this, for Dawn, creates a tension, a counterpoint, a loneliness in which Christians find themselves, assuming they understand and accept the sub-

versive implications of rejecting the powers as enslaving forces. But this struggle, which makes the Church more vulnerable, is precisely why there must be full dependency on the Spirit of God. Christians, in effect, die to the powers so they can live by a Higher Power. The same pattern of dependency happened between Jesus and the Father. Revelation happens when a power beyond indwells and flows through. For Dawn, this means that without a show of weakness there can be no authentic show of strength.

In the 1970s, Dawn encountered a novel interpretation of 2 Corinthians 12:9 which follows the “thorn in the flesh” passage from Paul. She agreed with R.C.H. Lenski that the Greek word *teleo* was better translated as *finished* than *perfected*.²⁴ Instead of reading the classic verse as, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness,” she altered the latter half to “for [your] power is brought to its end in weakness.” The *your* in this case is Paul’s power that came to a dead end. This fits with the next verse (in Dawn’s translation): “Gladly, then, will I boast in my weaknesses, that the power of Christ [not mine] may tabernacle [or dwell] upon me.” Dawn emphasizes how the human experience of coming to the exhaustive end of one’s own strength leads to the inflowing and outflowing of divine strength.²⁵ God chooses to tabernacle in human weakness as we die to our dependencies on human wisdom, wealth, status, morality, and power. From a multivalent perspective, I view Dawn’s approach as being harmonious with the standard view where the perfecting (i.e. maturing, *teleo*) dimension of God’s power dwells within our humble and often emptied states of weakness.

Such weakness, for Dawn, is by no means a passive or “weak” weakness. It is a paradoxical weakness that unleashes a greater power. It involves all of the best virtues, including courage. It is exemplified by Jesus going to Jerusalem and confronting the institutional powers of his day. Dawn quotes Luke Timothy Johnson to describe how Jesus sets the pattern for this “tension-filled paradox of death and resurrection, suffering and glory.” When the New Testament is taken as a whole and not split into parts (as if that is how we can get to the “real Jesus”), it becomes clear that

the “real Jesus” is first of all the powerful, resurrected Lord whose transforming Spirit is active in the community. But following Je-

sus is not a matter of the sort of power that dominates others, nor of “already ruling” in the kingdom of God. It is instead a matter of transformation according to the pattern of the Messiah.²⁶

The final two chapters of Dawn’s book explore the ways in which the Church either fails to be a tabernacle for God’s effluent power or succeeds in being a fit tabernacle, having been “reborn in weakness” (165). In these chapters Dawn draws on Ellul more than on any other writer. Her chapter on the Church succumbing to the seduction of various powers is full of quotations from *False Presence of the Kingdom*, and the final chapter refers often to *Presence in the Modern World*.

What is noteworthy is that her earlier review of the powers literature does not include Ellul’s perspective. This may seem odd, since her dissertation was all about Ellul’s contribution to the scholarly interpretations of biblical terminology. But clearly, in *Powers, Weakness* Dawn is interested not in comparing Ellul to others but in letting his functional approach to the powers strengthen her novel contributions concerning the pitfalls and opportunities of the Church. It is not problematic for her that Ellul does not view the powers as volitional beings. She knows that for Ellul, the powers are very real and very powerful precisely because they are more than mere extensions of material or social reality. In short, Dawn leans on Ellul’s dialectical approach to call Christians into new zones of responsible action.

Hidden Powers Both False and True

As noted earlier, institutionally related powers rely on being invisible and undetectable in order to function. Like actual conspiracies to harm or defame people, powers need to operate in the shadows, hidden from plain view. The obfuscation of rationality with irrationality, the mixing of truths with falsehoods, and the interplay of controlling and controlled factors all add to subtle power dynamics that influence people’s minds and behavior. But how interesting it is to note that truths of the Christian gospel also involve hidden dimensions and subtle dynamics of influence. Leaven, for example, is an apt metaphor for how God’s Kingdom operates. How does one account for such common ground?

Dawn invokes Ellul's biblical dialectics as described in *The Subversion of Christianity*: "Everything in the Bible is contradictory," but "there is revelation only as the contradictions are held together."²⁷ As soon as you separate the two sides, each part is rendered "false and deceptive." When not held in tension, each side is easily sacralized. At best, hiddenness and revelation have to be held together in tension. "As Barth says, he is the hidden God precisely in that he reveals himself. And he reveals himself as the hidden God."²⁸ Thus we can begin to see how both true and false power dynamics rely on hiddenness. But while God's truth involves an integrity of two things held in tension, false powers exist precisely because there is no dialectical balance. One element overpowers the other. Hiddenness (to continue with Barth's example) dominates over revealed truth, and truth, now subjugated, is thinned or hollowed out through external sacralization.

What is ominous in this description of false powers is that those who bow to them are not aware of these inner imbalances or contradictions. This is essential to all idols and ideologies alike: there is a unity that seems seamless. Nothing appears contradictory, and thus nothing is contestable. Without this pseudo-unity there can be no loyalty. Dawn applies these power ploys to the way that Christianity is subverted by worldly powers. A re-conformed version of Christianity gains a new legitimacy. It becomes a new moralism, the right version to follow. It no longer holds two things in tension. Power can be retrieved only when one element subjugates the other. The Church, in this condition, acts like a fallen, subjugated power.

Dawn is aware that Christians who reject the power-saturated ways of the world (wealth, status, influence, political clout, etc.) will end up looking weak and foolish.²⁹ What a scandal. She rightly references 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. But there is also a paradoxical "secret wisdom" at work in this rejection of the powers. A willing submission to death, which includes a dying to the powers, unlocks a new, liberating power that gives life. "None of the rulers of the age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). Likewise, Christians who live by a "theology of the cross" are viewed as being inconsequential. As in Tolkien, helpless hobbits are not seen by the Eye of Sauron.

Whereas worldly powers rely on a web of deceptions that make people unaware of the hidden incongruities operating in and around those powers, God's gospel power involves a revelatory opportunity in which hidden things are made visible through authentic actions. The one feeds off of ambiguity, the other brings things to light. As the task of Jesus was to make God known, the task of Christians is to reveal the truth of God in Jesus by living out the Pattern of death unto life. There is an integrity here between what is hidden and what is known, no less than a balance between two elements held in tension. This framework helps greatly to integrate the unmasking of false powers and the revealing of true powers. Bringing both to light go hand in hand.

On a practical level, Dawn works out seven realms of practice for church communities in which a posture of weakness allows for spiritual invigoration and strengthening. Christian vulnerability, for example, leads to bearing the suffering of others, sharing economic goods in common, and being hospitable to strangers and outcasts. Though counterintuitive, there is a hidden dimension of influence here that is very powerful, and that is why it is also subversive to the powers. This is the power of powerlessness. It resonates with Gandhi's nonviolent truth-force, *satyagraha*. To evoke Tolkien again: the rejection of using the Ring for power leads to the destruction of the Ring.

Throughout these final chapters, Dawn draws out the passages from Ellul's writings that best support her overall thesis that the defeat of social powers can truly happen only when a greater spiritual Power is activated through people who are no longer subjugated by those social powers.

Now the Church should be there precisely to affirm that there is another way, that there is an option, unseen by [humanity] but infinitely real, that there is a dimension to the affair which is unknown to [humanity], that there is a truth above and beyond the political alternatives which has its repercussions on them.³⁰

This passage helps us to draw together several strands of my essay. Ellul affirms the unique calling of the Church, which Dawn develops to a greater degree. Ellul affirms that there is a spiritual realm that is distinguishable but inseparable from social reality. Ellul affirms that the "above and beyond"

realm has an invisible quality but is nonetheless very real. And Ellul affirms that Christians can express the reality of this hidden realm in ways that affect politics and economics. The key question is ultimately, Where do real solutions come from to solve human problems? Do they come from the powers hidden in our institutions, or do they come from another realm that honors both Creator and creature in authentic relationship?

Dawn's greatest contribution to this discussion of the powers has to do with *the way in which* powers are defeated. This practical vision for the Church "reborn in weakness" is based in her belief that the powers are more than what can be analyzed by the social sciences. They have cosmic spiritual dimensions linked to their social sacrality and divinization. And while she may not agree with where Ellul landed with his ontology of the powers, she credits him fully as the master scholar for how real powers function in society. She adds to this a powerful vision for how the Church can actively subvert the powers instead of being subverted by them. Weakness, paradoxically understood, is the key to a Christian's unique vocation. And all the better when Christians do this work communally with other Christians.

Standing Against the Cosmocratic Mechanisms of Power

I would like to make a final connection to the work of René Girard, since his framework also speaks of the subtle power of "things hidden." Dawn actually makes this connection with Girard through her footnotes when quoting Ellul in the context of sacrificial living.³¹ She touches on Ellul's ultimate sign of God's action, which is a sign of weakness: the call to be sheep in the midst of wolves. As Ellul wrote in *Presence in the Modern World*:

In the world, everyone seeks to be a wolf; and no one is assigned to play the sheep's role. Yet the world cannot live if no one bears living witness to this sacrifice. This is why it is essential for Christians to guard against being wolves *spiritually*, that is, spiritual dominators.³²

Here we return to the quotation from Kierkegaard given at the outset of my essay.³³ There is a *pattern* of being sacrificial sheep for the sake of new life. This pattern is chiefly expressed by the Lamb of Christ, but it is also played out daily among those who live the pattern. When Ellul speaks of being wolves in a spiritual sense, he is thinking in terms of forceful power.

But again, we must appreciate how there is also an overcoming power associated with the sheep-path that rejects forceful power.

Dawn rightly references Girard in this very context. Victim mechanisms of scapegoating powerless people rely on hiddenness. These mechanisms have a spiritual dimension as they incite the rivalrous mob with feelings of revenge and vindication. But there is also a counter-power in truths such as forgiveness and mercy and nonviolence, all of which can have positive contagion no less than the mimetic negative contagion of the scapegoating mob.

The crucified Christ of the Passion Story disarmed the principalities and powers of justice *as they were functioning* in a real political situation. This amounts to a confrontation with real institutional powers as they are operating. And yet what a paradox. Jesus is mostly silent, non-confrontative, indeed a Lamb led to the slaughter. Then he is killed. And then? Girard points out that the subversive force of his nonviolence and character, having been a truly innocent victim, upended the entire charade on which the powers of redemptive violence relied. In other words, the powers are defeated by powerlessness. This is precisely where a dialectic approach makes all the difference. Yes, sociologically there is the defeat of a good man and perhaps the exposure of a sham process. But theologically there is a victory over the powers that has universal implications. Resurrection indicates defeat.

What we see in this master story is the battleground of two sets of invisible powers. We see the hidden powers of institutionally sanctioned violence colliding with the hidden powers of a nonviolent, non-coercive, forgiving God who acts within a human context. Similarly, Dawn invites both Christians and all prophetic people of conscience to engage in a battle against the powers that have real being, but never in a violent battle against other human beings.

One of Dawn's favorite biblical passages, which Ellul also references at the start of *Presence*, is Ephesians 6:10–20, the text about putting on the armor of God. After the naming of principalities and powers, the next term in Greek that follows is *kosmokratoras*, the “world rulers.” The term *cosmos*, translated as “world,” points us toward the social structures of this world.

And the Greek term *cratic* certainly links the forces to the operational realm where rulers rule. Paul equips his readers to stand against these ruling powers with the invisible counterforces of truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, and the Spirit sword of God's word. This series provides a structure for most of the final chapter in Dawn's book.

Over and against the hidden power of redemptive violence we see the hidden power of redemptive suffering. By illuminating the diversity of evidences in the New Testament for "weakness as God's primary method" (55), Dawn adds a very important word to the glossary of studying and resisting the powers: *weakness*. This addition complements Ellul's overall work in important ways by helping Christians and all resisters who prize freedom to act in ways that do not mirror the mechanistic methods of the *cosmocra-*
tors.

Dawn considers Ellul successful in closing the "hermeneutical gap" between the biblical framing of the powers and the modern understanding of the powers. She simply made the necessity and the methodology of resistance more concrete: the necessity, due to the real spiritual nature of the powers, and the methodology, due to the subversive power of weakness. Ellul's call to responsibility matches perfectly with Dawn's call to vulnerability.

I hold in my hand Marva Dawn's copy of Ellul's *Technological Bluff*. She was apt to write her name on the first page of the book and then add "The Year of . . ." In this case, she wrote "The Year of Bliss on Crutches" (followed by, "a gift from Sam Eerdmans"). What a testimony to her capacity to transcend the limits of life. How is it that a woman with so many physical setbacks could have so much stamina? For her, it amounted to another Power flowing in and through her.

As in all of her copies of Ellul's books, underlining is everywhere. Literally every page of *The Technological Bluff* contains some underlining. She digested Ellul's work thoroughly and deeply. We can be grateful for the ways that she helped to fulfill the IJES mission statement: "Preserving a Heritage, Extending a Critique, Researching a Hope."

Some of the underlined sections at the end of *The Technological Bluff* were first used in her dissertation and relate to Ellul's final warning, that we

might avoid the mistake of thinking that we are free. If we think we are free to solve our problems and have fresh beginnings within our technological milieu, we are truly lost, “for the only way to find a narrow passage in this enormous world of deceptions (expressing real forces) is to have enough awareness and self-criticism to see that for a century we have been descending step by step.”³⁴

Naming our non-freedom takes humility. It is easy to think that others are not free, but it is hard to admit this of ourselves. And while we might easily think that we are fully aware of this descent over the past hundred years, who is to say that we are fully aware of the descent over the past two years? Have we been paying attention to the recent technocratic drift? Perhaps, in our non-freedom, we are under the influence of world-ruling powers more than we care to admit. Dawn invites us into a zone of radical humility, to assess how we are first subtly subjugated by worldly powers, before we can awaken to the Pattern of the Lamb and thereby die to and disarm those very powers that beguile us.

Notes

1. Soren Kierkegaard, as quoted in *Provocations: Spiritual Writings of Kierkegaard*, trans. and ed. by Charles E. Moore (Farmington: Plough, 1999), 236.
2. Notable texts include Eph. 1:21, 6:10–12; Col. 1:16, 2:15; 1 Cor. 2:8, 15:25–26; 2 Cor. 10:4f.
3. Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, as quoted in Marva Dawn, *Powers, Weakness, and the Tabernacled of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 83. This work is now available on the IJES website. I am grateful to Dawn’s husband, Myron, for his permission to post it.
4. Dawn, *Powers*, 25.
5. Dawn, *Powers*, 59.
6. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers*, as quoted in Dawn, “The Concept of ‘The Principalities and Powers,’ in the Works of Jacques Ellul,” PhD diss., 1992. This work is now available on the IJES website. I am grateful to Dawn’s husband, Myron, for his permission to post it.
7. Dawn, *Powers*, 7.

8. "Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization I: By Way of a Brief Preface."
9. Marva Dawn, *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1.
10. Ivan Illich, "An Address to 'Master Jacques,'" as quoted in Dawn, *Sources and Trajectories*, 2.
11. These are "Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization I: By Way of a Brief Preface," first published in *Foi & Vie* 44, no. 6 (Sept./Oct., 1946): 678–87, and "Christian Faith and Social Reality," first published in *Free University Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (Aug. 1960): 166–77.
12. Jacques Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, trans. Lisa Richmond (Eugene: Cascade, 2016). This new translation recovered the original French title, *Présence au monde moderne: Problèmes de la civilisation post-chrétienne*. The first English edition was *The Presence of the Kingdom* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951).
13. Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, as quoted in Dawn, *Sources and Trajectories*, 25.
14. Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, as quoted in Dawn, *Sources and Trajectories*, 25.
15. Foremost for Dawn are Ellul's later works *The Humiliation of the Word* and *The Subversion of Christianity*.
16. Dawn, *Sources and Trajectories*, 26.
17. "Christian Faith and Social Reality," in Dawn, *Sources and Trajectories*, 171.
18. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 2.
19. Wink, as quoted in Dawn, *Powers*, 17.
20. Heinrich Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser: Ein Kommentar*, as quoted in Thomas R. Yoder Neufeld, "'Put on the Whole Armor of God': The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Supplement Series 140 (1997), 122.
21. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, as quoted in Dawn, *Powers*, 21.
22. Col. 2:15; Dawn, *Powers*, 22.
23. G. B. Caird, *Principalities and Powers: A Study in Pauline Theology*, as quoted in Dawn, *Powers*, 27.
24. R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1937), 1302, 1305.
25. Dawn, *Powers*, 37–41.

26. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels*, as quoted in Dawn, *Powers*, 58.
27. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, as quoted in Dawn, *Powers*, 83.
28. Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity*, 44.
29. Dawn, *Powers*, 91.
30. Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, as quoted in Dawn, *Powers*, 106.
31. Dawn, *Powers*, 125; Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 3; Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Dawn's final chapter is titled: "What, Then, Shall the Church Be? Images of Weakness."
32. Ellul, *Presence in the Modern World*, 3.
33. Dawn includes this quotation in a series of inspirational texts regarding paradoxical weakness. *Powers*, 63.
34. Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 441.

Letter from Jacques Ellul to Marva Dawn

This is Marva Dawn's translation of a letter from Jacques Ellul, dated February 27, 1987, using his punctuation and emphases. Dawn later confirmed her understanding of the letter in a conversation with Ellul at his home in Pessac, France, in June of 1987. Dawn includes a substantial part of this letter in her dissertation, prefacing it as follows.

Because his delineation of his understanding of the powers in *The Subversion of Christianity* differs in many ways from his perceptions in earlier works (as will be noted at various places in [the dissertation]), Ellul was asked in a personal letter [...] whether the apparent changes that will be observed are definite changes in his thinking or mis-readings of his works before *Subversion*, whether a particular reading of Scripture or further thinking changed his perspectives, or if his earlier works are written in ways that might foster different notions from those Ellul himself had really intended. Ellul responded partially to these questions in a letter that insists that the problem of the powers, the *exousiai*, must be studied, as everything he has written, in a dialectical fashion. He continued,

That is to say that they certainly exist, but not as entities comparable to human and materializable persons. They exist inasmuch as they are manifestation and not as beings. Thus, one finds the evil phenomena, the fact of Money, of the City, of the State, and of Technique, and these phenomena reveal the existence of an "evil spiritual power," but not as a sort of powerful angel reigning over the world and using Money or the State.

Satan is the accusation: therefore *everywhere* where there is an accusation, there is satan, but it is not a personage who provokes and

produces the accusations—the accusation exists by itself (and it is thus that one should understand the debate in Job).

The *diabolos* is the one who separates, divides: each time that there is a division, rupture, there is the *diabolos*—but it is not other than the rupture itself! It is necessary, for example, to refer to what Paul says: “It is no longer I that acts, it is the *sin* that acts in me.” But the sin is not a personage—and consequently I respond to one of your questions: the *exousiai* exist only by relation to us and to human affairs—we do not have to speculate on the inhabitants of the heavens, on the hierarchies of thrones and dominations; the Revelation is written for our existence and not to satisfy our curiosity!

One should not separate the “demonic power” and the power that it uses: it is, in our world, absolutely integrated; that is to say that there is not pure money or pure state, etc. [...] but the “surplus” that exists cannot be reduced to a natural reality, *because* it leads to a revolt against God—which is not of “Nature” but of the *corrupted* form of nature—and it is this corruption that is the *exousia*, the power. [...]

Jesus tempted by the devil, that means not a personage who is come to stand before Jesus to pose questions to him, but the questions are born in the heart of Jesus (as for all men) and these questions themselves were the devil!

As his letter states, the concept of “the principalities and powers” must be understood dialectically, but it will be seen that over the years Ellul’s own position has moved more toward the third of the four options given in *The Ethics of Freedom* for the meaning of the biblical concept, as quoted [in this dissertation]. In contrast, his earlier works, as will be shown [...], leaned more toward the second option.¹

Notes

1. See *The Ethics of Freedom*, 151–52. (Editor’s note.)

The Concept of “the Principalities and Powers” in the Works of Jacques Ellul

Marva J. Dawn

This essay consists of the first two chapters, and portions of the final chapter, of Dawn’s doctoral thesis, defended at the University of Notre Dame in 1992. The excerpts printed here were selected by Ted Lewis, whose added commentary is followed by “—Ed.” and is enclosed in square brackets. The entire thesis is now available in PDF form on the IJES website.

In her Acknowledgements, Dawn notes the contributions of David Gill, Neal Blough, and Joyce Main Hanks. She thanks her dissertation director John Howard Yoder. She closes with, “Most of all, I thank God for the gift of Jacques Ellul and the insights of his life’s work. His letters to me have been very gracious, and his ideas have changed my life.”

I. Introduction to the Problem

“The Principalities and Powers”

Throughout the ages of Christianity the biblical notion of “the principalities and powers” has influenced systematic theology, liturgy, and ethics. Beginning with the basic texts about the powers in Romans, 1 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians, and Ephesians, much of the self-understanding of the early Church and of individuals within it derived from the notion that union with Christ led to conflict with other values and entities.

St. Andrew of Crete (660–732) penned this hymn still sung in some Christian circles to express the reality of spiritual warfare with the powers and the assurance of triumph over them:

Christian, dost thou see them on the holy ground.
How the powers of darkness rage thy steps around?
Christian, up and smite them, counting gain but loss,
In the strength that cometh by the holy cross.

Christian, dost thou feel them, how they work within,
Striving, tempting, luring, goading into sin?
Christian, never tremble; never be downcast;
Gird thee for the battle; watch and pray and fast!

Christian, does thou hear them, how they speak thee fair?
“Always fast and vigil? Always watch and prayer?”
Christian, answer boldly: “While I breathe I pray!”
Peace shall follow battle, night shall end in day.

Well I know thy trouble, O my servant true:
Thou art very weary; I was weary too;
But that toil shall make thee some day all mine own,
And the end of sorrow shall be near my throne.¹

As will be delineated in the final section of this chapter, the concept of “the principalities and powers” became less important during the time of the Reformation and then disappeared from theological language for a while with the development of modern critical tools. However, now in the last decades of the twentieth century, the concept appears ubiquitously.

Along the theological spectrum from Paul Tillich² to C. S. Lewis,³ from such contemplatives as Henri Nouwen⁴ and such novelists as Madeleine L'Engle⁵ to such politically divergent activists as Daniel Berrigan⁶ and Richard John Neuhaus,⁷ from debates between Stanley Hauerwas and Julian Hartt about narrative theology⁸ to critiques of the organized Church⁹ or suggestions for its reformation,¹⁰ from such fields as nursing¹¹ to involvement in housing and church renewal,¹² from such television evangelists as Adventist George E. Vandeman¹³ to those opposed to the media,¹⁴ from South Africa¹⁵ to Sri Lanka,¹⁶ use of the concept of “the powers” pervades theological discourse. However, scholars' interpretations of the original meaning of the biblical concept of “the principalities and powers” vary widely, ethical formulations frequently ignore the hermeneutical gap between original meaning and present application, and most theological analyses have failed to

apply the concept to human psychology or to other dimensions of reality besides the State.

In order to fulfill the purposes of this dissertation, therefore, it will be necessary to survey briefly the literature on “the powers” to report the major approaches to the issues. Chapter 3 will outline representative samples from the exegetical debates about the nature and being of the powers and from contemporary applications of the “powers” language in ethics. Then it will sketch five kinds of attempts to bridge the hermeneutical gap.

Jacques Ellul’s Emphasis on the Concept of “the Powers”

French lay theologian, social critic, and professor of law and institutions, Jacques Ellul was one of the first to apply the concept of “the principalities and powers” to domains other than the State. In a series of three articles on “Problèmes de civilisation” published in *Foi & Vie* in 1946 and 1947, Ellul warned that it was necessary to pay attention to the structures of our society¹⁷ and itemized especially “la Technique, la Production, l’État, la Ville, la Guerre, et la Stérilisation” as structures requiring further study.¹⁸ The third article focused especially on political realism, which Ellul calls “une puissance corruptrice énorme,” and offered suggestions for a different sort of realism as the Christian response to the powers.¹⁹

Throughout his long writing career in social criticism, biblical studies, and ethics, Ellul has continued to unfold an extensive analysis of the nature of the powers. However, his programmatic essays of 1946–47 have not been translated into English, and many of his other works fall into distinctive tracks of social criticism or theology; consequently, few of his readers are aware of the significance of the concept of “the principalities and powers” in Ellul’s thinking. The first purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is to demonstrate in chapter 2, from scattered comments in Ellul’s later works and from his first three articles in *Foi & Vie*, that the concept of “the principalities and powers” provides a bridge between Ellul’s two major tracks of thinking and a key for interpreting his work.

Ellul's Place in the Spectrum of the Disciplines: Social Theory, Biblical Hermeneutics, Ethics

Ellul first became known in the United States in 1964 when *The Technological Society* was translated into English (ten years after its initial appearance in France) and introduced by Robert Merton, professor of sociology at Columbia University. Two important sequels to this work were *The Technological System* of 1977 (1980 in English) and *The Technological Bluff* (1988/90), but before these two he had published books about propaganda (1962/65), political illusions (1965/67), clichés (*A Critique of the New Commonplaces*, 1966/68), revolutions (1969/71), violence (published in English first, 1969), and modern forms of the sacred (*The New Demons*, 1973/75). These works, which philosophize about large moral issues and deal centrally with the problem of power, are named *sociologie* in Europe but would be better labeled in the United States as “critical social thought.” Ellul has also written literally hundreds of articles detailing various observations about the technological society.

Though Ellul might be considered one example of a particularly eminent line of social theorists (including such people as Marcuse and Durkheim), he goes against the tide in the field of biblical hermeneutics. His criticism of some modern methods of biblical exegesis is severe, and sometimes his own methods seem to lack essential rigor. His biblical works include volumes on Jonah (1952/71), II Kings (*The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*,²⁰ 1966/72), Revelation (1975/77), and Ecclesiastes (1989/90), and biblical treatments of the subjects of money (*Money and Power*, 1954/85) and the city (*The Meaning of the City*, in English first, 1970).

In the field of ethics, the influence of both Kierkegaard and Barth is evident. Rather than outlining a system of ethics along the classical deontological or teleological lines, Ellul posits an *Ethics of Freedom* (1973/76), which is radically Christocentric and practically applied to such issues as the use of money (1954/85), the practice of prayer (*Prayer and Modern Man*, in English first, 1970), and the way our culture destroys language by misuse and its emphasis on the visual (*The Humiliation of the Word*, 1981/86).

A second purpose of this dissertation is to bring some ordering into the montage of ideas about the powers in Ellul's various types of writings. This will be done by setting out Ellul's understanding of the nature and being of the powers in chapter 4 and then gathering the data of Ellul's implicit and explicit use of the concept in his social critical and ethical works in chapters 5 and 6, respectively. These surveys will map the ways his underlying biblical awareness of the powers is applied to various contemporary social and ethical issues.

Jacques Ellul's Emphasis on Dialectics Instead of Systems

Part of the difficulty in ordering Ellul's ideas about the powers lies in his quirky disavowal of systems. This rejection does not mean that Ellul is simply contradictory or incoherent, for, indeed, there is a deep coherence in all that he writes. He does mean, however, that systematic formulations cannot deal with the dialectical nature of reality, that apparent "contradictions" in actuality demonstrate that a message is too large for our categories. Ellul intends, therefore, that his work confront critical social analysis dialectically with theological and biblical knowledge without "any artificial or philosophical synthesis." Ellul refuses "to construct a *system* of thought, or to offer up some Christian or prefabricated socio-political solutions." Instead, he wants "to provide Christians with the means of thinking out *for themselves* the meaning of their involvement in the modern world."²¹ Ellul says it is not possible for him to look at anything *sub specie aeternitatis* because everything he thinks, does, and writes as a Christian is done in relation to a specific setting. External events and sociological, political, and ideological permutations, therefore, are highly influential because he thinks "at grips" with his surroundings.²²

This does not mean, however, that his work merely conforms to the changing currents of the times. Rather, Ellul's approach permits him to refrain from being mentally "committed" to any particular school of thought or to any specific program of action. On the other hand, his work is firmly based on the fact that he is "involved" in his relationship with Jesus Christ.²³ The anonymous translator of these words explains in a footnote that Ellul uses the word *engagé* (translated "committed") as that which he rejects because

the word carries clearly ideological political connotations in France and because he refuses to pledge his mind to “anything or anyone, save Jesus Christ.”

Such an existentialist approach, however, must be criticized when it leads to inconsistencies in thought or fails to fulfill its purposes in giving ethical guidance. Consequently, a third purpose in this dissertation is critically to evaluate the contributions and weaknesses of Ellul’s use of the concept of “the principalities and powers.” Inconsistencies and problems with his methods will be pointed out as Ellul’s ideas are gathered in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Because Ellul is “involved”²⁴ and makes clear his foundational biblical beliefs, it is possible to analyze and critique his use of the concept of “the principalities and powers,” even though he refuses to be systematic or become “committed” to any particular mode of thought. Because of the immense breadth of Ellul’s works, this third purpose will undergird the extensive survey of chapters 4, 5, and 6, so that the data outlined therein can be subjected to criteria of exegetical, sociological, and ethical method, respectively.

The Need for the Language of “the Powers” in Contemporary Ethics

A major focus of Ellul’s study throughout his long career has been the concept of “the principalities and powers,” which has been becoming more important again in contemporary theology. W. A. Visser ’t Hooft traces the loss of the cosmic Christ and the significance of his victory over the principalities and powers from the time of the Reformation, when Luther’s and Calvin’s struggles against different apocalyptic sects necessitated caution in treating the cosmic aspects of biblical eschatology. Visser ’t Hooft asserts that Schleiermacher expresses clearly the trend toward a non-cosmic and subjective conception of Christ’s kingdom and that the works of Harnack, Troeltsch, Weisz, and Schweitzer continued the progression. One of the most widely influential leaders in restoring the vocabulary of the powers in theological discussion was Karl Barth, although his work was much preceded by that of Johann Christoph Blumhardt and his son, Christoph Friedrich, whose emphasis that the lordship of Christ includes also the social

and political aspects of life had been largely unheard or misunderstood in their own time at the turn of the century but began to be comprehended in the aftermath of World War I.²⁵

Karl Barth, in *Rechtfertigung und Recht* of 1938, gives credit to K. L. Schmidt for speaking of the State as one of the angelic powers of this age in his Basle inaugural lecture on December 2, 1936.²⁶ A footnote in Barth's book asks if Heinrich Schlier was the first to recognize that the word *exousiai*, when used in the plural in the New Testament, signifies the angelic powers. Schlier's article "Mächte und Gewalten im Neuen Testament" had appeared in 1937. Barth adds that G. Dehn was the first to develop the argument to any great extent.²⁷

A major impetus for this return of the language of the powers was the extremity of events in the years surrounding World Wars I and II. Several years before the first scholarly treatments of the concept of "the principalities and powers," Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in 1932, "How can one close one's eyes at the fact that the demons themselves have taken over rule of the world, that it is the powers of darkness who have here made an awful conspiracy . . ."²⁸ Persons trying to find language to describe the horrors of the times returned to the concept of "the principalities and powers" to explain that which went beyond modern psychological explanations.

Similarly, in the era of nuclear weapons and the Cold War, the concept of "the principalities and powers" began to be used to describe the precarious situation of the world. For example, James W. Douglass asserts that Ellul "is right in his contention that the forces of death were never more apparent in history than they are today." Douglass continues, "The 'powers' referred to by St. Paul are moving the world inexorably toward a global death. To deny that such is the obvious direction of the world is to succumb to idealism."²⁹

Indeed, the horrors of modern Western civilization require a closer look at the concept of "the principalities and powers" in order to formulate more realistically an effective Christian ethic for these times. Amos Wilder of Harvard asserts that the concept of "the powers," rather than obfuscating or impeding the relevance of New Testament eschatology or Christology, in-

stead emphasizes the urgency of applying the gospel to the world of power structures in which we live.³⁰

The final goal of the dissertation, therefore, is to show in chapter 7 the importance of the notion of “the powers” and of Ellul’s dialectical method for ethics. Contemporary ethicists often fail to deal adequately with the problems of our times because they treat only on a material level evils that require a spiritual response. The dialectic of Ellul’s hopeful biblical faith and rigorous social analyses offers potential as a valuable tool for theological ethics.

II. The Concept of “The Principalities and Powers” as a Common Core in Ellul’s Theology and His Social Criticism

The Basis for Discovery of the Link

In the autobiographical work *In Season, Out of Season*, Ellul emphasizes that the two tracks in which he works cannot be synthesized because of the basic irreconcilability of the revelation of God and the world.³¹ One specific aspect of his thought, however, provides a bridge between his *sociologie* and his theology, and that is the biblical concept of “the principalities and powers.”³²

The connection first came to my attention because of the section on “the powers” in *The Ethics of Freedom*, in which Ellul lists the following possibilities of interpretation for the biblical notion:

Are they demons in the most elemental and traditional sense? Are they less precise powers (thrones and dominions) which still have an existence, reality, and, as one might say, objectivity of their own? Or do we simply have a disposition of man which constitutes this or that human factor a power by exalting it as such [...] In this case the powers are not objective realities which influence man from without. They exist only as the determination of man which allows them to exist in their subjugating otherness and transcendence. Or finally, at the far end of the scale, are the powers simply a figure of speech common to the Jewish-Hellenistic world, so that they merely represent cultural beliefs and have no true validity?³³

Ellul situates himself somewhere between the second and third interpretations as will be explicated in chapter 4 below. Immediately thereafter, in one of the most personal passages on the subject, Ellul describes this connection between the powers and social realities:

Political power has many dimensions, e.g., social, economic, psychological, ethical, psychoanalytical, and legal. But when we have scrutinized them all, we have still not apprehended its reality. *I am not speaking hastily or lightly here but as one who has passed most of his life in confrontation with their question and in their power.* We cannot say with Marx that the power is an ideological superstructure, for it is always there. *The disproportion noted above leads me to the unavoidable conclusion that another power intervenes and indwells and uses political power, thus giving it a range and force that it does not have in itself.* The same is true of money [... and] technology. (153–54, emphasis added)

It is the thesis of this dissertation that this consciousness of the powers and their relationship to social realities undergirds Ellul's critical social assessments, though he has couched his perceptions in such terms as "necessity" because of his firm conviction that to bring traditional religious references into the academic milieu of *sociologie* is inappropriate. His insistence that he speaks out of a lifelong confrontation with the question of the powers shows us that the concept provides an important key for interpreting his work.

The dialectic of Ellul's two tracks of work is linked by the powers in that he wants the hope and grace of his theology to be related to the concrete situation of the powers at work in the world. On the other hand, he insists that only on the basis of true freedom through faith is he "able to hold at arm's length these powers which condition and crush me [... and to] view them with an objective eye that freezes and externalizes and measures them." (228–33). Among those powers that he can freely assess objectively Ellul specifically includes the modern State, social utility, money, and the technological society (234, 256). His sociological assessments of these entities will be mapped in chapter 5.

The foundation for this theme was explicitly laid in a series of three of Ellul's earliest articles, written in 1946 and 1947. Because these articles

remain untranslated, few who read Ellul understand how his career began with such an outlining of his basic understanding of the “principalities and powers,” which then he undertook to assess more thoroughly in his larger works of social criticism. The following section delineates the foundational content of these articles.³⁴

The Structure and Functioning of the Powers as Enunciated by Ellul’s Earliest Articles in *Foi & Vie*

[In the paragraphs that follow, Dawn will at times use square brackets to distinguish her commentary from her paraphrasing of Ellul’s critiques.—Ed.]

The first article in the series, “Chronique des problèmes de civilisation I: En guise d’avertissement,” written shortly after World War II, criticizes Ellul’s contemporaries both for being obsessed with exterior problems without searching for their profound reality and also for thinking that civilization was very stable and satisfying even though it manifested inequities and bondages. He warns against simply plastering up those “accidents” (he cites communism as one attempt to plaster over inequalities) and failing to understand that if postwar society continued on the same foundations and fundamental structures humanity would die—spiritually and perhaps also materially. Ellul concludes his introductory remarks with the warning that the time was incommensurate with the rest of history, for its dilemma was one without loophole or compromise; people of 1946 must make a decision on the question of the structures of society.³⁵ [It is important to notice this use of the term *structures* and later of the word *forces* as Ellul’s earliest designations for the powers.]

In response to the inevitable criticism that his work is pessimistic, Ellul declares the following:

As far as I am concerned, I ignore that which is optimism or pessimism. What I know is that the world where I live is the domain of Satan; that human beings, myself included, are radically sinners; that God, miraculously, permits them to live. He organizes a world for them, but all that these sinful human beings know to do is to destroy it, and indefinitely God maintains it despite them. It is not possible for it to be different, for human beings separated from God

are separated from the source of life. They are doomed to death. But God does more than conserve. He saves. [...] And God saves in such a fashion that the prince of this world³⁶ is subordinated to the salvation of the human being by the victory of the Savior who becomes Lord.³⁷ (680)

Ellul stresses that if the order of the laws of God is neglected, it is not pessimism to state that civilization as construed by human beings is going toward death, for the situation is understood within the Lordship of Christ, who has already definitively won the victory, vanquished death, and accomplished God's work (681). Consequently, this article is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but a realistic examination of the factual situation, which must always be understood on the line between the Resurrection and the Parousia.

Ellul insists that he would not be interested in this civilization if he were pure spirit or only interested in self, but he lives in the milieu of persons toward whom he has to be a neighbor. In this article of 1946 Ellul explains the connection of the two tracks of his future work by calling himself a citizen of two cities who must by means of the discernment of spirits examine different facts and examine them differently. His work is to seek the final roots of the present situation and to judge these daily facts spiritually—i.e., with true Christian realism. Only such a judgment can give intelligible continuity for political and social events (682). The importance of this continuity explains the flight to Marxism because of the total incoherence caused by the Church renouncing its mission in the world.

The work of understanding the *structures* of the world in light of the Revelation must be constantly redone, for it can never be enclosed in a theological, political, or economic system, since the world is always changing. [Notice Ellul's incipient protest against systems.] Meanwhile, the Church has slept—and is it then still the Church?

The question of civilization is singularly complicated, almost desperate, because of the complexity of organizations, the enormous quantity of problems, the "frenzy" of the economy, the long disinterest of the Church (683), and the despair of so many people. All these things incite us to work, but at the same time discourage us by the apparent vanity of that work.

Ellul's purpose is to make an inventory of *forces*, beyond their social and economic forms, which condition life in modern times. These *forces* are identical throughout the world, they are common in all of civilization, they are independent of human will, they have a reality not easily separable from their contemporary form, and they give to the present age a radically new character.

[The description of the preceding paragraph is immensely important, for this is Ellul's initial understanding—written in 1946—of the structure and functioning of the powers which undergirds all of his sociological, biblical, and ethical work.] Indeed, Ellul asserts that his inventory of *forces* is not intended to exhaust the question nor to give solutions, for each of the points that he will indicate will merit a scientific study of one or several volumes [as the unfolding of his career has demonstrated]. Moreover, to give solutions [for the problems of our civilization] would be impossible. He declares that before a solution can be sought, a method must be found, and, before the method can be sought, the problem must be accurately posed. The folly of our times, he asserts, is that one pretends to give solutions without seeing the problem of these *forces* (684).

Ellul declares that we live in an age that is essentially materialistic—or, more accurately, that is characterized by a radical separation of the material and spiritual domains. This societal separation prohibits seeking fundamental *spiritual causes* for economic or political problems. The major fault of Christianity is that it has sought to deal with social problems with charity that does not fulfill the necessary spiritual conditions for it to be effective (685).

Ellul also responds beforehand to the critique that his comments are just intellectual pursuits when what is necessary is action. He asserts that such thirst for action is perfectly legitimate, but that three teachings must first be considered. The first is that the quest for action is one of the forms of the temptations of the world.

Action without thought is in the hands of Satan and a major characteristic of our times. Ellul objects that it is peculiar

to see Christians pick up this theme, whereas it is said to them precisely, "Do not be conformed to this present age, but be transformed." It is not a matter of doing nothing, but rather of not acting according to the modes of this present age. (686)

Secondly, the Scriptures teach us that Christian action depends on thought, on theology. No Christian action is possible without a work of spiritual and intellectual elaboration of what action to do (686).

Third, we must take seriously the constant affirmation of Scripture that it is a matter less of *doing* than of *being*. In our society which is so concerned with doing in order to make one's mark on things and people, Christians must learn again what it is to be. Consequently, Ellul proposes that the inventory which he will give in future articles will have as its goal to give elements for thinking sanely in our times so that Christianity can be lived in a concrete fashion in the midst of its difficulties. He concludes by emphasizing that in our present world it cannot be a question of any action if it is not a question of the Christian life itself (687).

Ellul concludes the second article of the series, "Problèmes de civilisation II: On demande un nouveau Karl Marx" (1947), with the inventory he promised in the first article. He begins this second piece by criticizing the mostly Marxist utopian proposals for French reconstruction after World War II, which show no understanding of reality because they are not complex enough and because they posit an ideal, which, if achieved, could solve all the problems.³⁸ After comparing (unfavorably) the mosaic of ideologies with the utopias of the past (361), Ellul emphasizes that their present abundance indicates the immense need for solutions, but that they offer purely technical solutions and, therefore, are necessarily fragmentary (362). The abusive application of technique to social situations produces more and more rapid disintegration of society (363). Furthermore, the rational conception of society leads to an analysis of problems in detail, while the utopians think that the addition of solutions of detail can give a general solution. Not one single work, Ellul exclaims, has tried actually to diagnose in a precise fashion the questions of the modern world. The problems are badly posed because they are isolated from the rest. Thus, the utopians make two medical errors; they choose remedies without diagnosing the

malady and they treat the exterior symptoms and not the true disease they express (364–65). [These comments especially point to the need for the kind of wholistic assessment which Ellul attempted seven years later in *The Technological Society*, thirty years later in *The Technological System*, and now more than forty years later in *The Technological Bluff*.]

Ellul asserts that the value of Marx's work was that he posed the questions in view of the entirety. Now there is need for a new Karl Marx (366–68). However, the work today is harder since the situation is more complex. First, it is necessary to know all at once the ensemble of phenomena, to have an encyclopedic view of our times, but our age of specialization prohibits taking account of all the facts and questions (369). Secondly, it is necessary, as Marx has shown, to have the right methods to grasp truly the world. Ellul insists that only an analysis that leads to the discovery of the *particular underlying principles* common to all of civilization [the *forces* of his first article] will be sufficient. Because the problems of civilization are not evident, it is necessary to disclose them in the woof of historic events, in all orders, even as Marx compactly and deeply investigated the situation of the workers in England in 1848.

Ellul objects to the notion that one's research must be disinterested. He says it is an anti-scientific attitude to declare that one has no *a priori*s. Marx is a good guide in this matter, for his work is carried by his spiritual judgment of things (370–71).

[Dawn proceeds to summarize Ellul's critique of past utopian thought and current Marxist ideology, while also accenting Marx's positive contribution for examining society in its entirety. Of primary concern is the concept of structures. She concludes this section as follows.—Ed.]

Finally, Ellul clarifies as follows his use of the term *structures* or *données fondamentales* [which again provides a foundational description of some of the elements of his understanding of the powers]:

Underneath the phenomena which we are able to see in the social, political, and economic domains, there are some permanent *forces* of which the tracks are found in each of the phenomena considered, and which assure to our times its unity under its chaotic and disordered appearance. Exactly as in a tapestry, there is an invisible chain

which assures the unity of the material and which is the fundamental element upon which is developed the patterns and the exterior ornaments. (371)

The word *structure* has become watered down to signify merely the temporary superstructures of the economy or politics, which can be changed without changing society itself. On the other hand, the *structures* are not eternal, as philosophy would name permanent elements (372). Rather, Ellul is concerned about those *structures* which authentically characterize modern society.

The second characteristic of the *structures* is that they are common to many phenomena of our society and, therefore, give a certain unity to its totality. The third characteristic is that if they were modified, all of civilization would be put in question. Because these *structures* have been misunderstood, techniques and utopias have been equally inefficacious.

Finally, a *structure* concerns the individual life of persons (373). It is a decisive *force* in the organization of their lives, the order of their thoughts, their behavior, and habits, and, at the same time, such *power* tends precisely to annihilate them. Ellul concludes, then, with this list of the essential *structures* which he proposes to study in future articles: "la Technique, la Production, l'État, la Ville, la Guerre, la Stérilisation" (374).

That list outlines much of Ellul's work in hundreds of articles and scores of books over the next forty-five years. The third article of the initial series, "Problèmes de civilisation III: Le réalisme politique" (1947), deals specifically with the *structure* of politics. This article is extremely important because it describes thoroughly Ellul's fundamental perception of the opposition between political realism, which actually is an illusion, and Christian realism, which enables the believer to recognize the functioning of the principalities and powers in the world. The article thereby summarizes the major motivations for most of the work of Ellul's various tracks—viz., to grow in Christian realism by means of his biblical studies, to see the world more realistically in his social criticism, and to challenge the Church to take up more effectively its task of Christian realism in his ethical works.

Ellul's thesis in "Problèmes de civilisation III" is that realism is a certain conception of the world with which we are all directly concerned.³⁹ Ellul acknowledges that political realism has valuable aspects; for example, it seeks to establish a little coherence in the political problems of our times (699). However, the realist solutions prove to be as fragile as others and as little a "solution" as possible.

Political realism shows itself to be an ensemble of phenomena that is not at all an arbitrary attitude; it has both ideological and material roots. First of all, it comes from skepticism (700). Then, the absence of truth, this radical relativism, leads to the second condition of political realism, which is its submission to fact as fact replaces truth (701). The condition of humanity replaces the notion of human nature, and politics becomes a defense of the human situation (702). Nationalism, dominated by the *spirit of power*, and the primacy of economics over politics, are key elements of this attitude (703), which is not merely a matter of words or ideas but of force and even of the blood of the world in which we live.

Ellul claims in 1947 that this power [of political realism] is no longer being discussed, but that it impregnates all the platitudes and is the philosophy of the times. All actions are measured by realism, and the measure it imposes is that of success, utility, interest (704). The most concrete and immediate utility justifies acts. All means and resources must be used in order to arrive at the goal, but the goal itself actually matters little (705). No longer can we even say that the end justifies the means, for it is only necessary that the means are well performed or efficient (706). Everything that is a "more" succeeds, even if it is more of death. A new morality is born, for in the measure that technical progress advances the choice of means diminishes (707).

It becomes necessary always to choose the means that succeed the most. For example, to obtain the best efficiency of a laborer, there cannot be ten techniques of work; there can be only one, for it is impossible to use means that are inferior if a person is realistic. Similarly, the journals of the Nazis and the communists are virtually interchangeable because they use the same means of ideological propaganda. It is this unification of means which is the grand moral phenomenon of our times and which assures to political realism a constant triumph. It might seem that there is a goal if Ellul says

"to obtain," but he insists that in reality there is not, for truly it is not an end that is sought, but solely the application of means (708).

Though the various doctrines of our times differ in their appearances, they are united in the one point that they are equally realistic and seek equally to succeed and to use the means that will succeed. Such a morality of means⁴⁰ necessitates the use of propaganda to arouse the support of the masses (709). One consequence of this is that theories claiming to help the individual must create the masses in order to succeed and therefore become anti-humanistic. Since it is the means which count, political theories no longer have any importance in any domain—private, public, intellectual—for the goals become vain because of the realism with which they will be obtained.

Another consequence is the impact of various imperialisms, for all becomes a proof of force, a veritable struggle for life, which is an extraordinary simplification of the game of politics (710). This leads fatally to conflicts between imperialisms that are more and more vast, which changes the relationship between war and the society. Positions become more and more exclusive, and this remarkable evolution transforms all efforts toward peace (711).

The example of the way in which the first Napoleonic War was the cause of all the others and parallel developments in modern politics show how we cannot escape this dilemma: the goal of efficiency excludes other goals, such as that of peace (712–13). Certainly if this situation were clearly seen, it would meet with general disapproval, but one must reckon with the lack of logic and of continuity in the thought of the crowds and the fact that realistic politicians work to prohibit the recognition of the true consequences of realism. Realism of action necessarily leads to moral hypocrisy.

In the economic domain, political realism represents equally an *enormously corrupted power* (714). Whether in capitalism or socialism, political realism leads to the vanishing of the real person; the law is the law of things, and so political realism leads to the annihilation of the civilization and of humanity (715).

A last characteristic of political realism is the trait of illusion. In the first place, the remedy for social ills (not a matter of relieving the misery, but of modifying the social conditions which give rise to it) becomes a sort of ideal toward which one is going, for which one sacrifices everything, and which permits the inhumanity of realism (716). This accords perfectly with the lack of an end, for there is not a veritable goal for action, yet people accept an action in the name of a paradise to come on the earth. On the other hand, the necessary delay in the intellectual mastery of the causes of disorder and evil makes the analysis of realism always out of date. Seeking remedies, realism is progressively revealed to be incapable of following the movement of causes and is thus reduced to superficiality and illusion (717).

[All the foregoing details of Ellul's 1947 description prefigure much of his later work in *sociologie*—his criticism of nationalism; of (non-Christian) realism's criteria of success and utility; of the way in which a morality of means necessitates the use of propaganda to arouse the support of the masses; of the reduction of politics to imperialisms, leading fatally to conflicts that are more and more vast; of the moral hypocrisy inherent in realism of action; of the law of things in the economic domain and the consequent vanishing of the real person; of the trait of illusion which characterizes political realism. These ideas were all expanded especially in *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (1965), *The Political Illusion* (1967), *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (1969), and *Autopsy of Revolution* (1971).]

After this extensive description of political realism, Ellul concludes that there is no way out of it. Existentialism is only an epiphenomenon of political realism, and it is absolutely useless to revive idealism or to hope for a new morality, since the sense of good and evil has today been replaced by realism (718). Finally, it is equally vain to believe that anyone could subordinate this enormous mechanism to a spiritual determination, since political theory is inflexibly determined by the *power and necessity* of means in all of the branches of civilization (719). A person is led to this dilemma: either he accepts the means which our society has created and is thereby obligated to be realistic, with all the consequences underlined, or she rejects this realism in the name of an authentic spiritual reality (which might be

Christianity or humanism), but then she puts in question the means themselves with a spiritual judgment different from that of success.

In a one-sentence section marked off to highlight his essential point, Ellul names this belief in all that which is included in realism the anti-Christianity of our society. His next section begins, then, with the clarification that realism is anti-Christian not at all because Christianity is a spiritualism but because it is itself a realism, but of another kind (720).

Christianity's realism begins with the recognition of the state of total and irremediable sin in which a human being is plunged. If psychology reveals the shame of one's actions, that only makes one take account more concretely of the judgment of God on one's life. Similarly, sociological studies of our civilization are only the actualization of the fact that our world is the domain of *the Prince of this world* (721). Finally, the study of history negates the idea of progress and thereby corresponds exactly to the prophecy of Jesus concerning the end of time. Ellul claims that it would be easy to multiply the examples, but these indicate not only a pessimism but also a recognition of the patience and grace of God. He himself chose as carriers of his Word rather questionable people such as Jacob or Samson and as ancestors of his Son an incestuous woman and a prostitute. Ellul asserts that the concordance between our sociological investigations and the Word of God [the two tracks of his work] is central to Christian realism, for God does not detach us from reality but rather plunges us into all of it (722)—both the material in its complexity and the eternal in its unity.

The contentions that revelation alone is sufficient or that the revelation is irrelevant to the real problem of humanity and society are equally false attitudes. In the realm of politics, for example, theological affirmations are insufficient. It is necessary to study the facts (723) to see the biblical truth incarnated. Next, this recognition of the facts and the application of Scripture to the facts leads necessarily to a decisive position. If the world appears in its reality as the domain of *the Prince of this world*, we are brought to a revolt by means of the non-acceptance of the concrete reality as it is and by the necessity of snatching the domination from this usurper. Compared to political realism, which is conformism because its criterion is the unrolling of history, the realism of Christianity is revolutionary (in the sense of

changing the course of history), because its criterion is the lordship of Jesus Christ, which must be incarnated in contradistinction to the constantly observable incarnation of *the principality of Satan*. The deplorable conformity of Christians shows not a lack of virtues or of courage but of true realism, and an abstraction of their spiritual life.

[The ideas of the preceding paragraph are very important for our purposes here, for Ellul specifically contrasts the incarnation of the lordship of Christ with that of the principality of Satan as the revolutionary life of true Christianity against the conformity of political realism. This recognition in 1947 of the importance of the concept of “the principalities and powers” makes more clear Ellul’s later sociological descriptions of the illusions of politics that we will study in chapter 5.] In a paragraph only one sentence long to highlight the contrast with the deplorable conformity of contemporary Christians, Ellul underscores the significance of his combining of realism and spirituality by reminding us of the very realistic political attitude of the Judges and Prophets (724).

It is not a matter of placing the facts into a theory more or less Christian, but of first utilizing the revelation which we have been given to have a view of the phenomena more profound and more true than our experience or sense or reason is able to give us [which is what Ellul attempts to do in all his studies of *sociologie*]. God has given us a new means of knowledge, which we must employ concretely. Moreover, the revelation teaches us that the phenomena are signs of a deeper reality—that of the *powers* (725). Christian realism always stands, then, in opposition to political realism, because it constantly puts political, economic, and social phenomena in their place.

The greatest of actual evils, with incalculable practical consequences, is that of usurpation. Beginning with the usurpation of the divine throne by humankind,⁴¹ realism leads progressively to usurpation by all the material powers; human beings themselves are dethroned to the profit of the economy or some technical application. Each power of the world seeks to usurp a place that is not its own. Political realism is in a way the conductor of this enormous confusion because it favors all these economic, political, spiritual, and cultural aggressions; it is the master of the *demonic* ballet and

reigns over the scholarly and technical incoherence with the consent of all. Christian realism, on the other hand, teaches us the existence of a certain order and leads to a tentative putting in place; its type is the phrase of Jesus, "Your Father knows that you have need of all these things. . . . But seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all the rest will be thrown into the bargain" [Ellul's interpretation of Mt. 6:33].

This shows precisely that Christian realism puts all phenomena into perspective by its relation to revealed truth. Moreover, it shows that Christian realism is essentially active, never a mere matter of words but rather an effort to penetrate into reality and to transform it (726). This is truly an authentic realism.

Christian realism, thus, involves consequences directly opposed to those of political realism. It is not static, but dynamic; it is always an anti-moralism. Jesus Christ's teaching that he came to seek sinners (without thereby rejecting the "others," if there are any) shows that he addresses himself to all of life, that he does not make of it two parts [sacred and secular]. Never does he give any rule to measure life. Rather, he announces the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is our only line of conduct. Therefore, moralism is a false realism (727); Christianity opens to us instead the liberty of following the Spirit. [This is the basis for his future ethical works, *To Will & To Do* (1969) and *The Ethics of Freedom* (1976) and part of his diatribe against ethical systems, which will be analyzed more thoroughly in the last section of chapter 6 and the fourth section of chapter 7.]

This liberty enables us to guard the difference between the judgment of God and the discernment to which he calls us and to know when to revolt against the world and when to accept it depending on which Spirit animates something—that of *Satan* or the Holy Spirit (728). What is necessary, in the face of the proliferation of means, is to give again an authentic end to these means and to place them into the perspective required by God. Ellul especially emphasizes as the purpose of his study that we must ruin the consensus of political realism and attack especially the *demonic spirit* of these enormous means, not by trying to extol some idealism but by affirming Christian realism through the thought and life of the members of

Christ. This will lead to a battle to the death not of theories but of daily life engaged on the foundation of consciousness raising.

Cartesian realism holds as true what is proven by reason; political realism, what succeeds; and Christian realism, all that which is conformed to the working of the Holy Spirit actualizing the work of God accomplished in Jesus Christ. Political realism values whatever succeeds in the present and promises the false consolation of a perfect future. Christian realism, on the contrary, considers the true situation of humanity, with its pains and hopes (729) here and now and refuses the poison of illusions and of false hopes for the future. Christian realism is not an abstraction (of Humanity), but the recognition that Jesus came to seek and to save each person who was lost. In Christian political thought, therefore, it is never a matter of ameliorating the situation of [an abstract] Humanity, but of becoming a neighbor, in [specific] individual and collective ways (730).

The relation of neighbor to neighbor is the criterion of Christian realism, for on that depends the testimony and value of works of faith. Even as it rejects hope in progress, it rejects also the predominance of facts as the criteria of action; for Christian realism the criterion of life and action, of the good, the just, and the true, is the Kingdom of God which is coming, which is already present, but hidden in our midst. The Kingdom will come independently of our will and of the course of history, but it is also present and already real through the victory of Christ over all the *powers* which direct the course of history (731).

The perspective of the Kingdom could enable us to envision political facts in their development, rather than as crude givens, but, when it renounces a biblical and eschatological theology, the Church is always behind in political and social matters. It has discovered the facts and tried to respond, but by the time it has found a response the historical situation has already evolved (731).

Ellul anticipates the reaction which such an affirmation will provoke (that the Church does not have to be prophetic in political matters but only in announcing the Gospel) and responds that his whole purpose is to distinguish radically between two ways of envisioning political situations—ac-

cording to the Christian faith or not. The facts that Jesus died and rose, that he promises to be with us, that he is already now Lord of history, that the Kingdom already established will come are living forces working in history. Christian realism evaluates everything by its relation to this Kingdom (732). Ellul summarizes his point as follows:

And the veritable, concrete historical development of a historical situation depends not on a logical or dialectical process but on this relation, announced or refused, with the Kingdom of God. It is thus that the Church must comprehend the reality of the world, and in so far as it does not do this work, all its declarations and its works serve for nothing. (733, emphasis Ellul's)

Ellul concludes by stressing the importance of such Christian realism in the domain of politics as the only method of thought conformed to the revelation and able to replace political realism, for only Jesus Christ was able to say, "I saw Satan fall from the sky like lightning" (734).

These final remarks underscore the importance of this article for our purposes, for in this early discussion Ellul juxtaposes the way of Christian realism, the freedom of anti-moralism, with political realism, the way of the demonic powers, defeated only in Christ. His insistence that such realism must be the perspective of Christians for their work to be of service shows us the reason for his own work—an attempt realistically to recognize in social reality the working of the powers and to offer the alternative of Christian freedom. His description of such realism also lays the groundwork for understanding his methods, for his works in *sociologie* seem to many critics to be overwhelmingly negative as Ellul attempts to expose the functioning of the powers in contemporary politics and economics, and his theological works radically oppose ethical systems that thwart the freedom of the Christian life under the Holy Spirit.

Before we can turn to those theological and sociological works, however, it is necessary in the following chapter to scan the field of scholars' perspectives concerning the meaning and application of the biblical concept of "the principalities and powers." Then we will assess Ellul's Christian realism concerning the powers in the broad spectrum of his works.

[This concludes the second chapter. What now follows here is a portion of the final chapter.—Ed.]

[...] Ellul's most important contribution to the debates about the powers is his recognition that what he finds in his analyses of social realities is structurally analogous to the Pauline cosmological theme. Ellul must be strongly criticized for frequently overstating his case and for giving inadequate attention to details as he paints his broad social canvases (his style is certainly an enemy of his message), but his general recognition that social ills must be combatted on the spiritual plane because they manifest the functioning of the principalities and powers is critically important for contemporary ethics.

[...] Ellul successfully bridges the worlds of sociology and theology, of reality and faith, of nonbelievers and Christians, of conservatives and liberals, but he does not want to synthesize these worlds. Rather, his dialectical placing of various disciplines together leads to tensions, the non-successful but faithful work of the radical Christian.

How Christians Should Deal with the Powers

Because Ellul understands the being of the powers in a functional way and because he rejects all systems of ethics, his assessment of social realities leads to what he calls the “modest but indispensable [...] preparatory task” of Christian ethics, which “does not have the right to furnish solutions for every problem, solutions which would be imposed with authority.” Rather, he wants his ethics to remind Christians that conduct is the “indispensable consequence of faith.” He wants to equip believers “with an instrument of reflection and explanation” and call them to earnest commitment to the world.⁴²

Chapter 6 outlined many of the specific suggestions of Ellul's “preparatory” ethics. These are summarized well by “Notes préliminaires” and its emphasis that Christians have several very important tasks to fulfill in light of the pervasiveness of the powers in our society. [...]

[Dawn then presents the following tasks (my summary): exposing the powers, disengaging from the powers, desacralizing the powers, colliding with the powers.—Ed.]

Besides these four tasks named in "Notes préliminaires," Ellul offers other suggestions for Christian response to the powers. He stresses often their role to build bridges of communication, to establish dialogue between enemies. *Living Faith* offers the most thorough list of specific Christian tasks, such as reconciliation and forgiveness (see chapter 6 above). Most important, Ellul proclaims the critical value of prayer as the chief weapon to combat the powers. [...]

[The final pages of Dawn's thesis summarize her argument.—Ed.]

Ellul's interdisciplinary use of the concept of "the principalities and powers" contributes to the discussion in two ways—because he bridges the hermeneutical gap by understanding the powers according to their functions and because he devotes most of his works of social criticism to describing those functions of the powers as they are evident in twentieth-century social realities. This connection which Ellul makes between the biblical category and contemporary realities is very profound, for by associating social, political, economic, and technological mechanisms with the biblical concept of "the principalities and powers" Ellul makes it possible to understand why these forces are able to exert such inordinate and inexplicable power over human lives. Furthermore, his complex analysis of these realities presents a reasonable (though not the only) modern approximation to what the biblical writers might have meant when they used the language of "the principalities and powers" originally. In light of the ongoing debates among biblical scholars, it is not possible to say whether Ellul is "right" in the way he understands the powers. But it is possible to state that his functional approach to the biblical concept and his dialectical approach to ethics as a tool for reflection on the dialectical interface of biblical study and sociological analysis lead to deeper insights into the spiritual battles of human existence.

This dissertation contends that Ellul's method of basing his theological ethics on his sociological assessments of the influences of technology, politics, money, etc., in our culture is a much-needed model for contemporary theological ethicists, who often fail to deal adequately with the problems of our times and technological milieu because they treat only on a human level evils that have a spiritual source. One of the advantages of Ellul's functional/dialectical approach to the Bible and the world, therefore, is that, though

we might not be too certain about the nature of the biblical principalities and powers, Ellul continues to be aware of their workings in the contemporary world. He has spent his life dialectically describing ways in which they function in modern society and calling Christians to be sentinels against these powers of evil.

Ellul has deliberately kept biblical language out of his social criticism in order not to alienate non-Christians. However, if his Christian readers knew those works better and if they could understand that his social criticism describes contemporary functions and effects of the principalities and powers, then they would know more clearly what Ellul is calling them to fight against in his ethical works. Christians could more effectively deal with alienating and oppressive technological, political, and economic realities if they understood that these forces are more than human and must be counteracted with weapons of the spirit.

Notes

1. Hymn by Andrew of Crete (660–740), translated by John M. Neele in 1862, #238 in *The Book of Hymns* (Nashville: United Methodist Publishing House, 1964).
2. “The demonic powers which ruled the world in the time of Jesus are ruling it still today. Our own century proves this irrefutably.” “The Right to Hope” (previously unpublished sermon preached at Harvard’s Memorial Church in March, 1965), *Christian Century* 107, no. 33 (November 14, 1990), 1065.
3. “There was never any question of tracing all evil to man; in fact, the New Testament has a good deal more to say about dark super-human powers than about the fall of Adam.” C. S. Lewis, “Evil and God,” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 23.
4. “An ecstatic life which ignores the ‘powers and principalities’ eroding creative international relations becomes an escapist life. Though the forces of evil infecting whole nations and peoples are often hidden, complex, and elusive, we are called, as Christians, to unmask and expel them in the Name of the God of love. That is the reason why we must continually search for a Christian spirituality which is global in its dimensions and unafraid to take seriously the dark forces at work on the international level. It is not hard to see the forces of evil at work. [...] The Apostle Paul does not hesitate to say that our struggle is not ‘against human enemies [...] but against the Sovereignities and Powers who originate the darkness in

this world, the spiritual army of evil in the heavens' (Eph. 6:12). It is the demonic power of death which holds the world in its claws." Henri J. M. Nouwen, *In the House of the LORD: The Journey from Fear to Love* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1986), 70–71.

5. "We forget that most successful high-pressure advertising campaigns deal subtly with our weaknesses, our insecure longing for status [...] so that we are being manipulated. A pitch to make us buy a new car or a new stove when our old one is perfectly good, so that we'll have a better 'image' of ourselves, doesn't make sense, but it's what the advertiser's in business for. And the powers of darkness know exactly where to infiltrate." Madeleine L'Engle, *A Circle of Quiet* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 16.
6. "Can Christians, therefore, unthinkingly submit before such powers? We judge not. The 'powers and dominations' remain subject to Christ; our consciences are in his keeping and no other." Daniel Berrigan, *America Is Hard to Find* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 35–36.
7. "The motive for political engagement [...] is obedience to the command to care for his creation, it is love for the neighbor, it is the joy of participating in God's unknown purposes, [...] it is the assurance that the principalities and powers of the present age do not have the last word." Richard John Neuhaus, "Why Wait for the Kingdom? The Theonomist Temptation." *First Things*, no. 3 (May 1990), 20.
8. In "Why the Truth Demands Truthfulness: An Imperious Engagement with Harrt," Stanley Hauerwas describes the New Testament as "a tale about the mortal combat between good and evil—that beyond us lie powers and principalities in the face of which we are powerless without God's intervention" (307). Julian Harrt's "Reply to Critics and Hauerwas" includes this comment: "Moreover, the ironical (mind-jarring) cast of the power of God manifested in weakness; of the glorification of the no-account; of the overturning of the kingdoms of this world and the ultimate irreversible submission of cosmic dominations and principalities; so far as the mind of Christ is in us nothing but these radical transformations and novel transfigurations makes sense, conveys the truth about the human being, about the course of history, about the fate of nations and of nature as well, and, above all, manifests the perfect will of God" (318). *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, eds. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989).
9. *The Church and the Powers: A Theology of Church Structure* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988) by James F. Cobbles, Jr., begins with chapters on "The Principalities and the Powers" and "The Powers in Modern Life."

10. "Corporate sin and guilt is much more complicated than that. It has a different genesis and a different structure. Corporate sin and guilt has, besides, a life of its own. This is what Paul meant when he said that we are not wrestling with flesh and blood but with 'principalities and powers' (Eph. 6:12)." Douglas John Hall, *The Steward: A Biblical Symbol Come of Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 159–60.
11. "This warfare is never presented as a symbol of humanity's struggle with itself, but as a direct confrontation between opposing personalities. [...] Most of Scripture is concerned with the endless battle for human allegiance to one or the other side of the invisible conflict" (followed by Ephesians 6:12). Paul C. Reisser, Teri K. Reisser, and John F. Weldom, "Holistic Health and Psychic Healers," *Journal of Christian Nursing* 3, no. 3 (Summer 1986), 33–34.
12. "We must work with our social programs; but they are not going to stop the flow of the demonic." Gordon Cosby, "A Prayer of a Chance: Taking Evil Seriously," *Sojourners* 15, no. 6 (June 1986), 18.
13. George E. Vandeman, *The Telltale Connection: Unsuspected Ties with the Frightening World of Angels-Turned-Demons* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1984).
14. Mother Basilea Schlink, *The Unseen World of Angels and Demons* (Basingstoke, Hants.: Lakeland, 1985). Another very significant example is found in a letter from the Hutterian Brethren of New York, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, and England to President Reagan (April 7, 1987), in which they say, "We feel compelled to warn you again that it is a fight against spiritual powers (Ephesians 6:11–17), which cannot be won with worldly weapons such as bullets and bombs. Whereas we are obedient to any law that is not against Christ's love, we cannot participate in or advise you on the politics of those kingdoms of the existing states. However, out of love to you and to the whole of [hu]mankind, we feel urged to warn you not to use Christian words to defend a war-making policy, thus deceiving the people into believing that certain wars may be their Christian duty. This would only be a victory for the Devil." Johann Christoph Arnold, Elder, and Hans Meier, "An Open Letter to President Reagan," *Plough* 15 (May/June 1986), 19.
15. "In the understanding of the early church, this is what Jesus Christ had done in his battle against the powers of evil. In his life, death, and resurrection he had conquered." An excerpt from Allan A. Boesak's book of reflections on the Book of Revelation and its relevance to the struggle against apartheid. "The Woman and the Dragon," *Sojourners* 16, no. 4 (April 1987), 29.

16. "Yet, the one who is greater, who defeated the powers (Col. 2:15) is also at work, saving and building." Charles Hooke, "Buddhist Conquest and the Future of the Church in Sri Lanka," *Transformation* 3, no. 1 (Jan.–Mar. 1986), 25.
17. Jacques Ellul, "Chronique des problèmes de civilisation I: En guise d'avertissement," *Foi & Vie* 44, no. 6 (Sept./Oct. 1946), 680.
18. Jacques Ellul, "Problèmes de civilisation II: On demande un nouveau Karl Marx," *Foi & Vie* 45, no. 3 (May/June 1947), 374.
19. Jacques Ellul, "Problèmes de civilisation III: Le réalisme politique," *Foi & Vie* 45, no. 7 (Nov./Dec. 1947), 714 and 720–34.
20. Though the author of this dissertation is committed to the use of inclusive language, a large number of authors cited herein make use of the word *man* in a generic sense. It would make this text too cumbersome to edit each instance of exclusive language, so an apology is made here for all further occurrences in both titles and quotations.
21. Jacques Ellul, "From Jacques Ellul . . .," in *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, ed. James Y. Holloway (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 7. Emphasis Ellul's.
22. Ellul, "From Jacques Ellul . . ."
23. Jacques Ellul, "Mirror of These Ten Years," *Christian Century* 87, no. 7 (Feb. 18, 1970), 200.
24. "Involved" is here defined as in the preceding section. Unfortunately, it has not been possible yet to trace the French word for which the translator selected this term, *involved*, to oppose to the French word, *engagé*, which he translates as "committed."
25. W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *The Kingship of Christ: An Interpretation of Recent European Theology* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1948), 15–31. See also *God's Revolution: The Witness of Eberhard Arnold*, eds. Hutterian Society of Brothers and John Howard Yoder (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 14–15.
26. Karl Barth, *Church and State*, trans. G. Ronald Rowe (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1939), 10.
27. Barth, *Church and State*, 89.
28. Quoted in Bob Bowen, "Driving Out the Demons," *Gospel Herald* 78, no. 20 (May 14, 1985), 337.
29. James W. Douglass, "On Transcending Technique," *Introducing Jacques Ellul*, ed. James Y. Holloway (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 141.

30. Amos N. Wilder, *Kerygma, Eschatology, and Social Ethics*. Social Ethics Series No. 12, gen. ed. Franklin Sherman (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 23–34.
31. Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season: An Introduction to the Thought of Jacques Ellul Based on Interviews by Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange*, trans. Lani K. Niles (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 213.
32. Many of the paragraphs of this first section first appeared in Marva J. Dawn, “An Introduction to the Work of Jacques Ellul,” *Word and World* 9, no. 4 (Fall 1989): 386–93.
33. Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 151–52.
34. In the following section, my editorial comments related to the purposes of this dissertation are put in square brackets to distinguish them from the thorough paraphrases and translations of Ellul’s critiques. Emphasis on key words signifying the powers is added.
35. Ellul, “Chronique des problèmes de civilisation I,” 678–80
36. Not until forty years later in his recent *The Subversion of Christianity* (1986) does Ellul specifically name “Satan” and “the Prince of this world” as among the “principalities and powers.”
37. This and all other translations in this dissertation of quotations from Ellul’s previously untranslated articles and books and from other French works are my own. My translations throughout the dissertation change Ellul’s language to make it inclusive.
38. Ellul, “Chronique des problèmes de civilisation II,” 360.
39. Ellul, “Chronique des problèmes de civilisation III,” 698.
40. Ellul seems to be contradicting himself by calling what he criticizes a “morality of means” since he has declared that the goal of realism is to succeed. By this title Ellul intends to emphasize that since the *only* goal is success, the focus must be on choosing the means that will be most efficient.
41. Ellul does not indicate here whether he means the usurpation of Genesis 3 or of the modern age beginning with the Enlightenment.
42. Ellul, *To Will & To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (Philadelphia: Pilgrim, 1969), 248.

Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization: By Way of a Brief Preface

Jacques Ellul

The current epoch is productive of problems. Yet both intellectuals and the everyday person are singularly slow to take stock of their conditions—to say nothing of seeking solutions. These problems are born of factual circumstances, of the development of techniques or of the economy, of social developments (sociological or psychological), of spiritual and artistic developments—and all these are presently changing rapidly. Often the problems have been modified before we have even become aware of their existence. It is quite ridiculous, for example, after the war we have experienced, to observe politicians using a form of diplomacy and methods of world organization, the principles of which go back to 1648.¹

Our contemporaries are obsessed by certain images of “the questions” (e.g., the social question, the communist question, the German question, the planned economy question). With the patience of an ant tirelessly dragging a cricket’s wing, with the incoherence of ants all harnessed to the same task and each tugging in a different direction, we insist obstinately on resolving these “questions” as if they were contemporary. And we struggle, and we fight for such a solution, as if it had the least real importance, without seeing that the social question is practically resolved, that the German question was posed in 1870, that communism has won the game in human terms and in a yet undefined form, etc.² It is a matter of a constant battle with shadows that fade away as soon as we think we have grasped them.

Ellul, Jacques. “Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization: By Way of a Brief Preface.” *Ellul Forum* 69 (Spring 2022): 57–66. First published in Jacques Ellul, *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage*, trans. Marva J. Dawn (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997). © Wipf and Stock Publishers. Used by permission.

There are two reasons for this [tendency to concentrate on obsolete questions]. The first is that we tie ourselves to exterior forms without searching for their deeper reality. We want to combat social injustice, and that is very good, and we connect it to an economic system, but we do not penetrate the true structures of this system. We do not attempt to penetrate into the lair of the blacksmith who is forging our chains, whether because of a sacred fear of this mystery or because of an incapacity to go far enough. It is easier to accuse [the] two hundred families, the Jews, or the bolshevik with a knife between his teeth—beyond that, we seem to have no way to get a hold on things. Nevertheless, it is only by going beyond that [into more critical analysis] that we will have any chance of encountering the more stable reality on which the shifting problems depend. It is in such a descent into hell³ that we might be able to grasp the element of continuity according to which the current difficulties are propelled. It is in attacking these roots that we have a chance of reaching the tree itself, and not in the chasing of leaves blown by the hazards of the wind.

The other [reason that we tend to concentrate on obsolete questions] is that we consider our civilization quite stable and quite satisfactory, even if, and especially if, we protest against iniquity, inequality, slavery, etc.; in other words, within this normal healthy body there are wounds that mar its beauty. In this progress toward well-being and being better still, there are hitches that make us lose ground. And we carry with us our Band-Aids to heal the wounds and our motors to get us going again. Communism, nuclear fission, the Beveridge plan,⁴ the United Nations, all these are, on the same level, examples of Band-Aids. Now, what we do not see is that much more than that is at stake today. At stake is a problem of civilization that can be posed very simply thus: EITHER our civilization will continue on these same foundations, with its same dominant ideas, the same basic structures, and then humankind will die—spiritually and perhaps also materially.

OR, rather, life will triumph within humankind, and then civilization will change its foundations and its structures. We are at an absolutely decisive point—such as there has never been before. And it is as a historian that I write that sentence—that is, as a person who knows how psychosis magnifies the present facts in a monstrous way, who knows what their contem-

poraries thought of Attila or of Tamerlane, who knows what the year 1000 was.⁵ I hope later to justify this claim that our time is incommensurable with the rest of history and that the dilemma posed is an authentic one without loophole and without compromise. It is necessary for us, people of 1946, to make a decision about the question of the structures of our society. It is truly the problem of all our civilization that is posed, of our civilization which is perhaps not far from total collapse.⁶

I realize that the reader will say, "More pessimism." However, we have to clarify this pessimism business! For myself I don't know what this pessimism or optimism is; what I do know is that the world in which I live is the domain of Satan; that human beings, myself included, are radically sinful; and that God, miraculously, allows them to live. He organizes a world for them, but all that these sinful people know how to do is to destroy it, and yet indefinitely God maintains it in spite of them. It cannot be otherwise, for human beings separated from God are separated from the source of life. They are doomed to die and can produce only death. But God does more than preserve. He saves. He gives to human beings a path whereby they recover life. He gives to human beings a truth by which they become capable of acting. And God saves in such a way that the prince of this world is subordinated to the salvation of humankind by virtue of the victory of the Savior who becomes Lord. There is no other way, no other truth, that could allow us to act and to live. Outside of that, there is only death. Consequently, whenever I see a human effort in another direction—when I see a human construction that does not take account of the Lord and of the order established by God—I know inevitably where that has to lead: to ruin and condemnation. There isn't any pessimism in that; it is an observation of the same order as the one I would make in seeing the driver of a car going 60 m.p.h. fall asleep at the wheel: it is not pessimism to say that there are certain physical and mechanical laws according to which unavoidably there will be an accident *under these conditions*. If the [human] order disregards the laws of God's order, and fails to recognize the meaning of the entire work of God turned toward the Cross, it is not any pessimism to observe that the civilization built by this humankind is going toward death. But this situation is included within a parenthesis; it is encompassed somehow

within the vaster fact of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the work of salvation. In other words, *such* a human work is bound to fail, but that does not mean that human beings are condemned for this, and that the life of the world because of this is radically jeopardized—for the victory has been definitively won, death is already vanquished, the work of God is already accomplished. Thus these successive human failures can change nothing in the cosmic situation, any more than in the situation of human beings before God. Whether a person succeeds in some material creation or fails miserably, that makes no difference in the condition of the sinful person. The person is nonetheless saved by Jesus Christ. And this is no more optimism than what [I was saying] a moment ago was pessimism. I am not optimistic about the French army when I affirm that Philip Augustus won the battle of Bouvines.⁷ This is a reality that is continuously true. It is no different from what is expressed by my affirmation “Jesus Christ vanquished Satan” or “Jesus Christ is risen”—therefore humankind in its present reality can be saved. Thus in this study there is neither pessimism nor optimism. There is here a realistic examination of the factual situation, a situation that is one moment of the action of God on the earth and that we must consequently never cease to consider as being on the line that runs from the Resurrection to the Parousia.

Would I then say, “I take no further interest, then, in the fate of this civilization”? No doubt yes, if I were pure spirit. Yes again, if I had only my own isolated self in view. But here, as with a body given by God, I live in this world amidst people to whom I am to be a neighbor. Thus [it is] impossible for me to retreat to that untroubled solution. There is the concern that the people who surround me live a life such that they can hear the words that liberate. There is the concern that the victory of Jesus Christ be experienced in and by these people. There is the concern of the fracas for the world where these people live, that it might be more livable—and thereby conformed to what God wanted for this world. Even in this affair I cannot have the same attitudes and the same judgments as the other people. For I am situated in a perspective that is a bit peculiar. Citizen of two cities, I have in hand a particular instrument that obliges me to examine different facts and [to examine them] differently: the discernment of spirits. I thus

cannot be content with the opinion, ill-conceived or profound, that people have concerning their affairs, any more than with the solutions, technical or spiritual, that they work out. Everything must be sifted through the sieve of the factual situation I was describing above, and nothing can spare us this work—whether the world be euphoric or feverish—for, truly, the world cannot do without this work, which consists in seeking out the ultimate roots of the present situation and in judging everyday facts spiritually. Only that can provide intelligible continuity to political and social events.

Now this discovery of a continuity is of such importance that in large part it explains the ascent of Marxism. Until now [our cultural life] was totally incoherent. The churches had renounced their mission in the world. Liberalism was barely capable of taking stock of the superficial connectedness of events without [perceiving] any inner necessity. Marxism applies its method, and everything becomes luminous. Human beings find themselves finally in a world where they can move about knowing from where they come and where they are going. And if existentialism has any political bearing today, it is that of being the living proof of the failure of Marxism. Because the latter is really overwhelmed by events, once again absurdity, incoherence become the adjunct of existence. There is no longer a possible future. There is only a freedom that knocks a person over like a stone into the obscurity of nothingness. Thus becomes evident the necessity of discovering, ever anew, the structures of our world, as something of a bridge between the eternal act of God and the present moment, which we live with the duty to act in this world according to the will of God. It is a matter on the whole of bringing our time into line with what it has been given us to know about the Revelation. Then it is a matter of proceeding to actualize the Gospel as much for the world where we are as for ourselves. Now, this work must ceaselessly be done again. It can never be enclosed in a theological *summa*, nor in a political or economic system; the face of this world changes. We cannot once for all benefit from the lessons of history nor from the good relations established between the Church and the world. [It is] the task of the pioneer, the inventor, for which almost every Christian generation must accept responsibility again, lest the Church prefer to fall asleep in the pleasant contemplation of the promise that the gates of death will not prevail against her. But when she sleeps, is she still the Church?

In any case the question seems singularly complicated today—nearly desperate. The complexity of our organizations, the enormous quantity of problems, the frenzy of the economic realm, the Church's long lack of interest, and the despair—the immeasurable despair of people today.⁸ All these things, which add up to the eve of the end of a civilization, incite us to the work, with urgency, and at the same time discourage us by its apparent vanity.

Nevertheless, “when the wind rises, one must try to live.”⁹

In the theme that I wish to open up with these remarks, I shall not seek to achieve this work totally. I am attempting simply to make an inventory. Beyond the social and economic forms, there are forces that condition the life of our time. These forces are identical throughout the world; they are common to all our civilization; they are independent of human will; they have a reality not easily separable from their temporary form; finally, they give to our time its radically new character. It is the inventory of these forces that I shall attempt to make. Therefore, it will be a matter not of exhausting the question nor of providing the solutions. To exhaust the question is neither my object nor my pretension. We are here in a nearly new realm. Each of the points that I shall indicate would merit a scientific study in one or more volumes. Thus it is a matter more of opening the way to the research than of [reaching] any conclusion. To provide solutions is even less possible: before seeking the solution we must find a method; before seeking a method we must pose the problem. Now, the course of history has posed the problem perfectly, but it has not yet been reduced to intelligible terms, and consequently we cannot have an adequate method, and still less a solution. For this is the folly of our time: we claim to give solutions without even looking at the problems. We cast a superficial glance over the world and pretend to organize it for a thousand years. Is it not one of the least contradictory traits of our epoch that we demand answers before we are capable of formulating clearly the questions? But then, is not the historian obligated to ask the reason for this incapacity?

The fact seems clear enough. We are in an essentially materialist time, or rather, a time of radical separation between two realms, material and spiritual. For economic or political problems, economic or political responses.

The separation of the realms prohibits going further, and particularly seeking in this realm spiritual causes and foundations, envisaging all the data of our times from a spiritual perspective, as is essential. And therein we find the common measure [linking] the incoherent phenomena we are watching. It would be, therefore, a matter of Christianity succeeding at getting rid of the iron corset that was imposed on it, in order to resume its research and the analysis of this time. To that end it would be necessary for the Church to be armed with an exact and solid theology and to know how to apply it to the present world.

This inventory shall thus be a tentative spiritual view of the foundational givens of the present world. Without an exact stocktaking of this kind, it is absolutely vain to try to act in the political and economic realm. And that is the central error of social Christianity on the economic or the political terrain.¹⁰ Moved by social problems—unemployment, capitalism’s injustices, working-class poverty, etc.—Christians have wanted to look for their solutions. And that is very good because of the charity. But it is an error in that it cannot achieve anything. It is a task like wishing to fill a barrel from one end without checking whether it is closed at the other! Under *certain* spiritual, economic, and social *conditions*, this work of charity might have some efficacy. But those conditions have not been fulfilled. [Therefore,] on the one hand, let the charity be truly that which Scripture demands, the charity toward the neighbor (and not toward the Worker or the Proletariat), with its immediate and urgent work. On the other hand, let Christians exercise their discernment concerning their times in order to “hold on to what is good and abstain from every kind of evil” (1 Thes. 5:21).

I know, after all, the critique: “More investigations, more intellectual research! What we need is to act! What we are waiting for is a call to action!” There would be much to say about this reaction, which is particularly lively among today’s youth. But in the face of this thirst for action, which is perfectly legitimate, I will note only three insights:

The first is that at present this is one of the forms of the world’s temptations. “No matter what it is necessary to do, let us act.” This is the spring behind every fascism, every dictatorship. Action for its own sake, without any thought to direct it, abandoned as it is to the hands of a supreme di-

rector, who in this case is Satan, is a major characteristic of our times. It is odd to see Christians picking up this theme, even though it is precisely said to them, “Do not be conformed to the present age, but be transformed.” What is called for is not to do nothing, but rather not to act according to the modes of the present age.

The second [insight] is that Scripture teaches us that action depends strictly on thought—and more exactly, that the action of the Christian depends on his theology. Good works are not possible without good theology. The two things are linked—not automatically, but by God himself. Note 1 Tim. 1:3–10 or Titus 1:5–16 or 2 Pet. 2; in every case the person with “false doctrine” is at the same time an agent of death. Theological error commands moral sin, one could say. This close dependence, which ought to be studied, is a warning to us: there is no Christian action possible without our knowing exactly what God expects from us, without a work of intellectual and spiritual elaboration on the subject of the action to take.

The third [insight] is that we are in a time which progressively clarifies situations and obliges us to take seriously this constant affirmation of the Scriptures: it matters less to *do* than to *be*. What is important, for example, is not to act purely or justly, but rather to be pure and to be just. Now this is singularly crucial in a world that is going in exactly the other direction; for in our time everyone is concerned to do, to act, and to put one’s mark on things and on people, but one is preoccupied very little with being—or rather, one learns to be nothing more than a machine destined to act. It is necessary that Christians today relearn what it means to be. [They must learn] how that requires a certain acting and a certain thinking—but how this thinking is part of their being (and can by no means be disincarnate; that is why we can reverse the previous proposition [and say it is] impossible to have a good theology unless you are saved by Jesus Christ), and how this action is but an expression, temporary and incidental, of their being.

In short, this inventory should have as its goal to provide the elements for thinking sanely about our times, in order to live a Christian life in a concrete way in the midst of our present difficulties and in order to act through our own life. We shall see elsewhere as we move on that indeed there is no act in the present world other than life itself.

1. The date 1648 signifies the Order of Westphalia. That treaty at the end of the Thirty Years' War is taken as laying the foundation of a world made up of "nations," each claiming "sovereignty."
2. Ellul means that the German problem is much older, that it goes back at least to 1870 and therefore is not a contemporary one. Handling the German question differently in 1870 might have led to a situation different from World War II, which ended the year before this article was written. We will see later in the essay that Ellul refers to communism, not as incarnated in the form of the Soviet empire, but in the theoretical terms of the socialist ideal. Ellul comments below on how socialist thought had largely won the allegiance of the intellectuals of his time and place.
3. Ellul uses the phrase *descente aux enfers* here, which is the technical term referring to the credal affirmation of Christ's triumphant descent to hell. Having extensively studied Ellul's use of the concept of the "principalities and powers," I am convinced that he is noting here the necessity for understanding the evil powers, over which Christ triumphed on the cross, as sources of problems in the world.
4. William Beveridge was an English lord who wrote a plan on social security in 1942 and one on employment in 1944. These plans were important in the complicated context of the reconstruction of postwar France, the rise of communism in Eastern Europe, and so on. Ellul was extremely well aware of all that was being written in terms of social planning and political philosophy. See note 2 above concerning Ellul's use of the word *communism*.
5. Ellul's point is that, in spite of obsessive magnification of the present conditions, the situation is indeed more critical than when Attila (406[?]-53), the ferocious king of the Huns, earned his name "the Scourge of God," or when Timur the lame (Tamerlane), a Mongol warrior (1336[?]-1405), conquered territory from the Black Sea to the upper Ganges. The idea that the year 1000 was marked by popular terror has dubious historical attestation, but present media and cultural hype about the coming of the year 2000 makes this idea about medieval Europe understandable.
6. Since Ellul wrote this in 1946, we have to ask what it means for us at the close of the twentieth century. Certainly it is not the case that the problem Ellul identified has been remedied and humankind's survival ensured. Perhaps we can see both that the situation of a collapsing civilization is still—and much more so—the case and also that Ellul, as he often does, overstates his theme to make his point.

7. Philip Augustus (Philip II), king of France, defeated a coalition of the German emperor, the count of Flanders, and the king of England at the battle of Bouvines in 1214.
8. Ellul actually says *le désespoir sans nombre des hommes*, which literally means “the despair innumerable.” One French adviser suggested that “counting” is an odd thing to do with despair(s) and that perhaps Ellul intended *sans nom* or “unnameable.” I think instead that Ellul did indeed mean “without number,” since in other places he writes about the many kinds of despair in the modern world, so I have used the word *immeasurable* to imply both range and depth.
9. French pastor Bernard Charles recognized that this quotation comes from André Gide and is an allusion to the “wind of liberty” and to the biblical *le vent souffle où il veut* (“the wind blows where it wills”), a reference to the Holy Spirit (cf. John 3:8). [*Forum* editor’s note: The quotation seems in fact to come from Paul Valéry, “Le Cimetière marin,” final stanza.]
10. “Social Christianity” is in France a loose counterpart to the “Social Gospel” movement in the United States. It still exists today in France and publishes *Autre temps* (Other Times).

Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization: Trajectories

Marva J. Dawn

This first article in the series “Chronicle of the Problems of Civilization” is extremely important for understanding the directions that Ellul’s life and work took. What he emphasizes “by way of warning” is the need to look beneath the reality of exterior problems in order to find their profound truth. Throughout his life Ellul believed that these fundamental structures had to be understood in order to stop simply plastering up the “accidents” of inequalities and other social problems. When Ellul says that he hoped “later to justify this claim that our time is incommensurable with the rest of history and that the dilemma posed is an authentic one without loophole and without compromise,” he was outlining his own tasks for the future of detailing the consequences of what he calls Technique. His books entitled *The Technological Society* (1954/65), *The Technological System* (1977/80), and *The Technological Bluff* (1988/90) and many of his theological works all emphasize that the turn into the technological milieu was—he says with typical overstatement—as radical a change as the original Fall into sin.

“The Principalities and Powers”

Ellul writes that the people of 1946 must make a decision on the question of the structures of society. Ellul’s use of this term *structures* and later of the word *forces* is especially significant because by those terms he designates and describes his initial understanding of the functioning in the modern world of “the principalities and powers,” a biblical notion that undergirds all of his sociological, biblical, and ethical work. In this article Ellul explains that

his purpose is to make an inventory of these *forces*, beyond their social and economic forms, which condition life in modern times. “These forces are identical throughout the world, they are common to all of civilization, they are independent of human will, they have a reality not easily separable from their temporary form,” and they give to the present age “its radically new character” (emphasis added).

When Ellul asserts that his inventory of *forces* cannot exhaust the question or give solutions, since each of his points merits a scientific study of one or several volumes, his remark is demonstrated by the unfolding of his own career. He emphasized that before a solution can be sought, a method must be found, and before the method can be sought, the problem must be accurately posed—and then he spent the rest of his life trying to pose the problem of these forces. The problem is that our age is characterized by a radical separation of the material and spiritual domains. This societal separation prohibits seeking fundamental spiritual causes for economic or political problems.

The fact that Ellul links spiritual causes with economic and political problems in this article from 1946 is especially significant. It demonstrates that from the beginning he based his career on this dialectical understanding: that his separate tracks of theology and *sociologie* had a profoundly deep connection, and that the biblical notion of “the principalities and powers” is that correlating link (and therefore can be for us a key for understanding all that Ellul does).

The connection first came to my attention because of the section on “the powers” in *The Ethics of Freedom*, in which Ellul lists the following possibilities of interpretation for this biblical notion:

Are they demons in the most elemental and traditional sense? Are they less precise powers (thrones and dominions) which still have an existence, reality, and, as one might say, objectivity of their own? Or do we simply have a disposition of [human beings] which constitutes this or that human factor a power by exalting it as such [...] In this case the powers are not objective realities which influence man from without. They exist only as the determination of man which allows them to exist in their subjugating otherness and transcendence.

Or finally, at the far end of the scale, are the powers simply a figure of speech common to the Jewish-Hellenistic world, so that they merely represent cultural beliefs and have no true validity?

Ellul situates himself somewhere between the second and third interpretations, for these reasons:

On the one side, I am fully convinced with Barth and Cullmann that the New Testament *exousiai* and the power of money personified as Mammon correspond to authentic, if spiritual, realities which are independent of [human] decision and inclination and whose force does not reside in the [person] who constitutes them. Nothing that I have read to the contrary has had any great cogency for me. [...] On the other side, however, the powers do not act simply from outside after the manner of Gnostic destiny or a *deus ex machina*. They are characterized by their relation to the concrete world of [human beings]. According to the biblical references they find expression in human, social realities, in the enterprises of [human beings]. In this sense the occasion of their intervention is human decision and action.

This position is a significant one, for it names the principalities and powers as entities outside of human beings and yet closely linked with human and social realities. Immediately thereafter, in one of his most personal passages on the subject, Ellul describes this connection between the powers and social realities:

Political power has many dimensions, e.g., social, economic, psychological, ethical, psychoanalytical, and legal. But when we have scrutinized them all, we have still not apprehended its reality. *I am not speaking hastily or lightly here but as one who has passed most of his life in confrontation with their question and in their power.* We cannot say with Marx that the power is an ideological superstructure, for it is always there. *The disproportion noted above leads me to the unavoidable conclusion that another power intervenes and indwells and uses political power, thus giving it a range and force that it does not have in itself.* The same is true of money [...] and] technology (emphasis added).

In my dissertation research, I discovered that this consciousness of the powers and their relationship to social realities undergirds all of Ellul's critical social assessments, though he couched his perceptions in such terms as

“necessity” because of his firm conviction that to bring traditional religious references into the academic milieu of *sociologie* was inappropriate. His insistence that he speaks out of a lifelong confrontation with the question of the powers shows us that the concept provides an important key for interpreting his work.

The dialectic of Ellul’s two tracks of work is linked by the powers in that he wants the hope and grace of his theology to be related to the concrete situation of the powers at work in the world. On the other hand, he insists that only on the basis of true freedom through faith is he “able to hold at arm’s length these powers which condition and crush me [... and to] view them with an objective eye that freezes and externalizes and measures them.” Among those powers which Ellul specifically listed in *The Ethics of Freedom* and which he himself objectively assessed were the modern State, social utility, money, and the technological society.

Ellul’s second major theological book, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948/51), also laid much groundwork for understanding his perspectives on the concept of “the principalities and powers.” Immediately on the second page of the text Ellul discussed the powers by stressing that Christians, by virtue of their relationship with Christ, are confronted by the spiritual forces of the world. Citing Ephesians 6:12 several times in the book, he emphasized equally both the freedom from the fatality of the world that communion with Christ creates and the result of his liberation that we “*can* fight against the spiritual realities of the world.”

We cannot in this book trace the progression of the notion of the “powers” throughout Ellul’s corpus, but if the reader remembers it as the link between his two tracks of work, then the brutality of Ellul’s *sociologie* becomes undergirded with the hope of his Christian faith, and that faith has practical (and more effective) application in response to the troubles of our society. The link is made clear in few of Ellul’s works; *The Humiliation of the Word* (1981/86) is a notable and very helpful exception. Though Ellul’s own perspective on the being of the powers changed between such earlier works as *Money and Power* (1954/85) and one of his later books, *The Subversion of Christianity* (1984/86), his most important contribution was his emphasis

on recognizing the powers by their *functioning* through such contemporary realities as technology, politics, and economics.

Other Important Themes in “Chronicles”

Ellul’s response to the inevitable criticism that his work is pessimistic is a constant theme in his work. [...]

We should also notice in this first major article Ellul’s incipient protest against “systems.” He emphasizes here that the work of understanding the structures of the world in light of the Revelation must be constantly redone, for it can never be enclosed in a theological, political, or economic system, since the world is always changing. Ellul sounded this call for new assessments throughout his career, which is one of the main reasons that he resisted the notion of “disciples” of his own work. [...]

A final theme introduced in this article that plays a large part in Ellul’s future work is his response to the critique that his comments are just intellectual pursuits when what is really necessary is action. His recognition that such a quest for action is one of the forms of the temptations of the world is expanded perhaps most extensively in his later explication of the functioning of the powers in *The Subversion of Christianity* (1984/86). That book laments the many ways in which the true message of Christ has been co-opted by the institution of Christendom and its actions in political and economic realms, by its philosophical and moral systems.

When Ellul reminds us of the scriptural emphasis that Christian action depends on thought, on theology, he introduces a main theme of *The Presence of the Kingdom*, which appeared two years after this article (1948/51). In that book, Ellul specifies that the first form of action for the Christian must be a realistic assessment (which means Christian realism) of social and political conditions. In this article, Ellul’s next reminder of the constant affirmation of Scripture that it is a matter less of *doing* than of *being* introduces the theme of “incarnating” the will of God through who Christians are, which is also expanded extensively in *Presence*.

We must note, finally, the closing statement of this first major article that Ellul’s “inventory should have as its goal to provide the elements for think-

ing sanely about our times, in order to live a Christian life in a concrete way in the midst of our present difficulties and in order to act through our own life.” That is an excellent summary of the connection of the various strands of Ellul’s work. His underlying recognition of the workings of the principalities and powers is one of the main elements necessary for “thinking sanely” about the difficulties of our times, so that Christians can respond not only materially but spiritually to the economic, political, and technological problems that Ellul’s *sociologie* elaborates. His biblical studies and ethical works describe the Christian life and spur believers to greater faithfulness in response to the freedom of the gospel. Along the way, Ellul’s corpus contains many weaknesses and mis- or overstatements, but these basic directions in his work have stimulated, for both believers and nonbelievers, new levels of thinking and living.

A Personal Reflection on Hidden Powers in Our Current Times

Ted Lewis

A study of “principalities and powers” as named in the Bible is an elusive matter. How do you put words to unseen realities? Ambiguities abound. And yet we live in a techno-world filled with invisible frequencies that can pass through stone walls. Is that any different than how ancient people thought about ghosts? But if today we talk of “the ghost in the machine,” we are accused of having an unwarranted dualism. It’s a tricky topic. Are unseen forces real? As I am still a learner in this subject, I write this reflection as much for myself as I do for you. I hope to approach the subject from some fresh angles, and later I will present a challenge to us all in our current historical situation.

One way to understand the nature of the powers is through the lens of compulsive addiction. If not from our own experience, then certainly from someone we know, most of us understand how addictions can have a power over one’s life. We know that people captivated by a strong habit can feel like they have no agency to counteract that power. This is why recovery groups have a common first step, namely to admit that we are powerless over such-and-such and that our lives have become unmanageable. The next step is to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. Altogether, we see an acknowledgement of both negative and positive powers beyond our control. And yet these are powers with which we can interact. Or is it the other way around? They interact with us? Addiction and recovery powers are spoken of as being independent from the individual, and yet there is also participation.

When Jacques Ellul wrote about powers being independent from social, political, and economic things, he named this “beyond” as a spiritual realm. But for him, spiritual does not mean separable; it is just *more than* what can be studied empirically. Invisible, yes, but also powerful. *Spiritual*, for Ellul, implies an invisible *force* of influence. Like gravity, a spiritual force in the world is difficult to define with respect to its source; it eludes explanation. And yet it is there, like wind; we see and feel its effects. As Marva Dawn noted, Ellul is interested more in the function of powers than in their ontological status. The Bible speaks of such powers, and Ellul accepts that they are real.

Another way to think about the meaning of *spiritual* is how it speaks to vitality or life-force. Similar to how the Romantic-era poets referenced a spiritual dimension in nature (full of mysterious wonder) and human nature (full of mysterious depth), scholars who critique a mechanistic worldview often advocate for a spiritual orientation for engaging modern problems. This evokes not so much an eye to unseen supernatural entities as a sensitivity to the human realms of heart, soul, spirit, and even virtue. It is evidenced in the language of people who say, “I’m spiritual but not religious.” Ellul, being a Christian, does accept a supernatural framework (while critiquing institutional religion), and so his view of *spiritual* contains both the “beyond” and the innate life-force. You could say, both transcendence and immanence. Tao and Chi. But his chief concern revolves around perverted operations in the spiritual realm.

In Ellul’s most comprehensive discussion on the nature of “Dominions and Powers” (chapter 9 of *The Subversion of Christianity*), he goes to great lengths to say that the powers “exist only *in* and *by* their relation to us” (174). And yet they are more than what we can study on a social or political level. “The powers add a ‘plus’ and a ‘different’ factor to our history” (175). What a dilemma. How do we describe what this “plus” factor is? Ellul employs the term *spiritual*, as I explored in my opening article. At least Ellul was humble about it.

When all is said and done, we perceive a residue, a kind of impregnable core, and inexplicable hardness. Why, after all, does one obey the state? Beyond factors that may be understood and analyzed, not

everything can be accounted for, as in the case of the soul that the scalpel cannot find no matter how close the analysis. The residue is a spiritual power, an *exousia*, that inhabits the body of the state. [...] The same applies to money. (175)

In this same discussion, Ellul clarifies that the powers are neither personifications nor, in a gnostic sense, bound up with a metaphysical principle of evil. He is not interested in the spirit world as described by either orthodox or esoteric traditions. He also sidesteps whether or not the powers have a volitional nature. The key for him is that the “powers are nothing by themselves” (174). And therefore, *no-thing!* This is resonant when Paul reminds the Galatians that they were once “in bondage to beings who by nature are not gods” (4:8). In other words, powers presume to be independent beings, special like gods, full of mystery, worthy of attention and sacrifice, but ontologically they are limited and interdependent with human people and institutions. In their created and subsequent fallen state they are not only rebellious, they are *no-things* unto themselves. We can think of them like the Tower of Babel: they reject limits in order to become powerful, but on the inside they are quite limited.

Where, then, do powers derive their power? What a question! Perhaps one analogy is a parasitic relationship. Parasites survive by ingesting off a host. Powers survive by perverting anything in God’s creation or human society. Once attached to a person, a group, an institution, an ideology, they feed off of cultural signifiers to grow in significance. This perverts their host; powers pervert anything they possess. Meanwhile, they become sacred, though this is really a pseudo-sacrality. Elements of illusion and delusion are involved. Sacred objects or concepts—the hosts—appear more powerful than they really are as *form* dominates *content*. In effect, the initial truth-content of hosts is hollowed out. The form becomes disincarnate. Ungrounded. By being hollowed out, forms become lighter, ready to float upward like a helium balloon. Going upward, they become grandiose. Consequently, they become detached from their natural states. A Subaru is Love. Science in its natural state of dissent and debate becomes Science (always with a capital S) unquestioned and unchallenged.

We can summarize things this way. Outwardly, the host of powers appears powerful and thus wields power; inwardly, because they are based on a lie, they have a weakness. Outwardly: unlimited! Inwardly: limited. They lack integrity between outer and inner dimensions. Think again of an addict in denial: an outward force to reckon with, an inward mess of contradictions. For Ellul, Jesus is the complete opposite: a reconciled unity between what is revealed and what is within. To become free, responsible human beings, we grow into being reconciled persons.

As powers derive power from heightened sacrality, they gain a higher capacity to transfer power to people. For example, people bestow power onto idols so that power can be retrieved from idols. On one level there is a genuine power dynamic, because the entire system of idolatry is powerful to leverage economic allegiance and sacrifice. On another level, there is nothing there; the power is ephemeral. Hence the Hebrew prophets debunked the idols of the nations: “They have mouths but cannot speak.” Violence provides another example. On one level, yes, violence is truly powerful as a mode of harm; and yet all violence is dependent on a lie, an illusion of one person’s or group’s ascendancy over another. A bully’s real harm-power is based on a pseudo presentation-power.

The reason this dual perspective of power is important to understand is that *powers cannot be disarmed if they do not have this duplicitous dynamic of pseudo-power*. This is nothing profoundly new, since postmodern thought is largely about deconstructing narratives of power. But in our context here we can appreciate how Ellul calls us to desacralize the mighty hosts of worldly power. It is precisely because the powers are *not* all-powerful that they can be defeated, like deflated balloons. If we understand how powers parasitically hollow out the hosts they possess, and how they sustain themselves according to an illusionary lie that people can believe, we stand a better chance to disarm the power of hidden powers.

Back to Addiction and Deception

We can now apply our earlier addiction scenario to larger powers at work in society. Addiction is not only an apt metaphor but a real correlative with corresponding parts. At both micro and macro levels there is a complex of

lies, rationales, mind games, and deceptions. An individual creates a cognitive framework to sustain what is essentially a personal death culture. And yet they do it in the name of Life and Necessity. They put a good face on things. Beneath the surface, though, are hidden behaviors. One cannot sustain unhealthy vices in the light but rather in the shadows. From an outside perspective, family members and friends see through the foils, the excuses, the justifications. But for the addict who does not admit to the incongruities, there is a protective closed system wherein all the elements function together in repeatable albeit dysfunctional fashion. Such a system resists alteration. “Don’t mess with me!” Official narratives are protected “tooth and nail” if they are questioned and exposed.

The *force* of this system, as some of us know all too well, influences the wider “family system.” Patterns of communication emerge. Other family members have to figure out what role they play in the midst of this death culture. Do they absorb the negative? Do they mediate between others? Do they retreat for safety? Fight, flight, or freeze? These dynamics are very real, and trauma itself is inseparable from the emotional and cognitive pieces that compose the larger system. Toxic churches, tense workplaces, or wounded communities also function in these systematic ways, repeating harmful mechanisms that bind certain members within and exclude others from joining. Group systems carry a power of their own that is greater than the sum of its members. When fears and anxieties are high, there can often be a group psychosis to hold things together.

We can now imagine how, on a collective level, entire segments of a population, including those who serve public interests at high levels, can operate within a closed system that resists change and replicates harm. But in order for this system to function over time, it requires perpetual reminders to legitimize the status quo. These socializing reminders include myths, narratives, symbols, and so forth—namely, the hosts for the various powers. Again we see the symbiotic relationship of legitimization with all the lies, rationales, and deceptions. No one likes to feel that they have been taken in. But that is precisely what *has* to happen for people to function in a dysfunctional societal system. The word *deception* literally means “to be taken in.”

Let me give a simple example. We want to think our store-bought milk is healthy when it reaches us, and thus we have come to reject the possibility that raw milk is healthier for human consumption than overly pasteurized and homogenized milk (not to mention the manner in which most cows are drugged and fed). Consequently, we are led to believe that raw milk is dangerous to drink, associated with germs and disease or perhaps bad fats; conversely, we believe that processed and thinned-out milk is better for us. We accept this reversal of truth as “natural” and we bear the consequences (unknowingly) of harmful lactose intolerances that stem directly from the impoverishment of processed milk. From this example, we can see the cyclical relation between hidden truths, sustainable lies, and harmful effects. Powers in the service of subtle death-cultures can alter natural systems for unnatural ones in ways that are hidden from plain view. Propaganda is subtle this way; it has to be, or it wouldn’t work! Again we see the dual aspect of power: truly influential, and yet based on falsehoods.

It is hard to understand the nature of the powers. By definition, they resist definition! They function in shadow zones. Shine a light on them and they lose their operational capacity. Powers are by nature undetectable. They foster ambiguity. They work best if people underestimate their existence, but it also works to push the pendulum the other way. Over-estimating their power through the lens of dark supernaturalism or fictional conspiracies is an effective way for powers to maintain their institutional participation. What they avoid is being known. They resist desacralization, demythologization, and deconstruction. They do not wish to be “put on spectacle” or publicly paraded about in plain view, as described in Colossians 2:15. A lie cannot live in the light.

This leads into an insight about the pretentious character of the powers. One of Ellul’s favorite Bible passages is 2 Corinthians 10:4–6.

For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ. (RSV)

The Greek word for “proud obstacle” is *hupsoma*; other English versions translate this as “high thing” or “lofty idea” or “pretension.” What makes these things “high” is a rejection of limits. This is the pseudo-dimension I’ve been discussing. The Tower of Babel is archetypal here. To reject nature or human limits or natural law or traditional morality or the Tao or whatever defines grounded human life involves a constellation of dubious things working together: a lie, the obfuscation of truth, collective allegiance, grandiosity, dehumanization, and so forth. The irony is that in wanting to remain hidden for what they truly are, the powers pose as visible gods worthy of human praise and sacrifice. This makes sense. People will serve powers only if those powers are what they *seem* to be outwardly: sacred and authoritative. They have to be “high” to be followed. Only a critical prophet, such as Ellul, would call them pretentious.

My main point in all of this is that the nature of the powers, no matter how one views them ontologically, beguiles human subjects. Like Ellul’s understanding of *technique*, they have a totalistic reach and they are self-sustaining; like the Edenic sin, they involve deception and they strive toward autonomy. In the same way that we deny the real truth of our own addictions, we are susceptible to being taken in by the “powers that be” in our modern world. Nowhere is this more evident in today’s world than in the area of media persuasion.

A Challenge to Us All

I want to apply some of my reflections on the powers to our current times. I will focus mostly on the matter of public relations and public opinion. What I have suggested above is that without illusion and delusion, powers that parasitically function within institutional structures could not survive. Beguilement is integral to the way hidden power works. It is always easier to see how beguilement works on other people, but to think of *ourselves* being beguiled by anything is almost an impossibility. Our minds immediately defend us from the thought that we might lack freedom unknowingly.

In 1984 (of all years) I had a chance to take a course on “Bias in the News Media” with guest professor Noam Chomsky. He invited a Russian scholar of news media to talk to our class, and I’ll never forget what he said: In

comparison to people in the (then) Soviet Union, Americans and other Westerners were far more susceptible to being manipulated by media narratives. This was partly due to the fact that Russians had become seasoned to not trust their mainstream sources of news. But he also explained how people in modern democracies, especially the educated class, want to trust what they read. Without that trust, there would be too much of a crisis of knowing. His main point was that if, someday, there was a more coordinated effort to control the narratives of news media (not that to some degree it was already being controlled in the 1980s), North Americans would be more easily manipulated than their Russian counterparts. Perhaps the Russian people have collectively learned well from Dostoyevsky's famous "Grand Inquisitor" chapter. Trusting too much in the voice of unquestioned authority amounts to losing one's personal freedom and responsibility.

As it is easier to observe others who are misled by publicly controlled information than ourselves, especially if others hold to opposing viewpoints, it is also easier to identify the workings of propaganda in times past rather than times present. It is a riskier thing, for example, for a university professor to invite students to study the orchestration of information in *real time* than it is retrospectively. Such an invitation is subversive, is it not? William Stringfellow attempted to spotlight the mechanisms of media control during the Vietnam War era *while* it was happening. He recognized how in the 1960s our government was addicted to war. With the military-industrial complex working in full force, the war was simply the visible expression of invisible powers that served a death culture. Manufactured machinery had to be sold. But to sustain the weaponry, manufactured lies had to be told. Stringfellow, in *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (1973), explained how the "verbal factor" in media discourse is always prominent in the ploys of the principalities (98). He mapped out eight stratagems that the powers rely on in their parasitic relationship to truth in the public square.

By 1970 the deceptions could no longer be covered up. Official falsehood was unraveling, at least to some degree. This is because the powers, as Ellul described in *Subversion*, are "expressions of chaos" (176). Seeds of destruction are sown not only by the powers but also within the powers themselves.

Not only do cultures of death bring havoc to human beings, they unravel the host institutions they feed upon (i.e., Watergate). Empires, by nature, rise and fall. If we consider how the powers parasitically feed off information-media hosts, we can observe how angst and confusion go with the territory. The stormy obfuscation of truth is normative. While noble forms of media engage human rationality and moral conscience, manufactured media erodes them. Whenever truth is hollowed from its host, human faculties that engage truth are also casualties of information war. Fear fills the hollowed cavity. Powers related to what the Bible calls the “Prince of Lies” purposely numb an individual’s senses and intuitions so that a person no longer trusts what they see and hear. Those who trust in idols become like the idols they revere: they have eyes, but do not see; ears, but do not hear (Ps. 115).

To some extent, these dynamics of manipulated information are centuries old. But certainly in the last one hundred years, people in power have perfected the means of controlling public opinion. I would like to suggest that in the last two years the perfecting of those means went into hyper-drive in a manner that even most progressive thinkers in society have not fully comprehended. During the four years of the Trump era we saw heightened examples of information wars, including the making and naming of fake news, the ridiculing of mainstream press, Fox News-ization, and the norming of polarization. Other nations experienced similar contortions. Many people are still stunned over the degradation of civil discourse, unable to respond clearheadedly.

During the more recent pandemic era, however, we have seen media trends that make the previous era seem mild by comparison. The immediate coordination of mainstream and left-leaning news narratives in February and March of 2020 is one example. Despite the roguish pronouncements of President Trump, there was consistent messaging throughout all top media and university networks. Death statistics, both real and projected, abounded with little to no contextualization. There was a noticeable shift away from previous standards of airing alternative or dissenting voices in the area of public-health reporting. The uniformity of this reporting was unprecedented. By spring, the racial element (due to higher death rates) was woven into

the narrative to reinforce compliance among a progressive audience. We witnessed the largest public-relations effort in human history, which had the capacity to influence every nation in the world with respect to medical directives and lockdowns.

Over the next few months we witnessed the corporate funding of newly established fact-checking networks, most of which were given the charge to discredit and dismiss well-credentialed thought leaders who challenged the official narrative of COVID-19 issues. The management of misinformation / disinformation / mal-information (now known as MDM) has now grown exponentially, to the extent that unannounced censorship is acceptable as a vital feature of a free democracy. Wikipedia can attach the word “misinformation” to anyone without consultation. To question official Science is now on par with hate speech, as framed by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate in London. There is no longer room for experts to debate; there are only *the* experts.

I do not wish to bend the topic toward my personal views on gene-based virus technologies or vaccine mandates or health-freedom issues. Ellul had grave concerns in all of these areas (as expressed in his *Technological* trilogy), but that is not what I wish to focus on. I am also deeply saddened by the countless people who died during this pandemic with respect to every cause of death. What is concerning to me is the shift in media techniques. I am concerned how the educated, progressive sector of modern society has largely become uncritical during the past two years by trusting the directives of what Eisenhower would have called a dangerous “complex of powers.” In his final farewell speech he warned Americans about the “military-industrial complex” as one might warn about a complex of Church and State powers fusing together. Keeping them separate is a way to preserve checks and balances. Together, they lead to overreach and the loss of civil liberties. What people do not remember from this speech is that Eisenhower named a second complex of equal concern: a techno-science-government complex. In the context of scientific research he warned of two scenarios of “unwarranted influence.”

The prospect of domination of the nation’s scholars by Federal employment, project allocations, and the power of money is ever pres-

ent and is gravely to be regarded. Yet, in holding scientific research and discovery in respect, as we should, we must also be alert to the equal and opposite danger that public policy could itself become the captive of a scientific-technological elite.

If that sort of complex is a threat to society, imagine if government health agencies collude *with* pharmaceutical industries *and* high-tech industries *and* news-media agencies *and* government-intelligent agencies. That is the condition we now face.

Sixty years after Eisenhower's speech, we have witnessed a greater *complexification* of multiple agencies that are increasingly funded by private corporate interests. There are also more lobbyists for pharmaceutical companies than legislators in the United States Congress. This is no different than the way that Big Oil or big agricultural companies in the past positioned themselves in relation to national interests and government agencies. And progressives, by and large, were the first to call out the corruption and greed, let alone the overreach, of such companies. But now, the same sort of corporate dynamics and profiteering are happening with respect to high-tech and pharma industries, and progressives have become their chief defenders. Even to question the new agendas of progress and global networking is viewed as dangerous. And the irony: the chief funding for the mainstream and left-oriented press is coming from these very industries that for decades were viewed with by progressives with mistrust.

What is overlooked is the way that news information is managed by these high-altitude interests with amazing sophistication. Again, if the powers are involved in these institutional complexes, the power is derived from mechanisms (read: "hollowed-out forms," as described above) that beguile audiences into being loyal and uncritical. That is basically what has happened during the pandemic: the university-linked educated class has been led along to think that their best interests are held by those who turn the wheels of today's institutions. The lower classes, with their gut intuitions, know better, but they have no power and their voice carries no authority. Their banners for Freedom are viewed with disdain and thus dismissed. Higher up, dialogue has suffered; sharp thinkers who question the official narrative are no longer given platforms for public discussion. How is it pos-

sible, for example, for a Pulitzer Prize-winning *New York Times* journalist to have his entire set of interviews deleted unannounced from a YouTube channel? (“Digitally Disappeared: YouTube Has Deleted Six Years of My Show,” *Common Dreams*, online, March 2022.)

“Propaganda begins when dialogue ends,” wrote Ellul. You can read this two ways. If we stop dialoguing (which four years of Trump aided and abetted in the United States), then propaganda has more room to grow. And secondly, when propaganda is mobilized, it purposefully stunts the ability for dialogue to grow (which two years of pandemic public relations has compounded on the previous years). There is now what I call a New Moralism that holds power over progressive-minded people who want to protect the world from offensive language and misinformation. But who decides what is offensive and what is unwarranted information?

In my workshops on “Bridge-Building Conversations in Polarizing Times,” I have heard from many people how challenging (and at times impossible) it is for them to have dignifying conversations with people who hold a different viewpoint. It is as if dissent and disagreement are no longer socially allowed. That, I think, is a symptom of unseen powers that serve a new death culture that is phasing out civil life in local communities. Uncritical compliance, in my estimation, is also a sign of unseen powers operating without detection. As a facilitator by trade (in the fields of conflict resolution and restorative justice), I am deeply tuned into the nature of discourse. My vocation revolves around helping people to balance trust-building with truth-telling so that they can heal the past and co-exist in the future. We are currently facing a major crisis of trust and truth in today’s world, and this itself bears testimony to the power of hidden powers at work.

From Nonfreedom to Freedom

Perhaps if we disagree on matters of natural immunity and medical freedom and even media misinformation, we can agree on this: Jacques Ellul saw much of what we are experiencing today, well ahead of time. As a keen prophetic observer he saw in seed form what we might see as fuller expressions of technique-driven technocracy. He himself was present at a Nazi rally in the 1930s. It was a sobering experience for him because he could

feel the tug of the collective not just among those around him but *within* himself. The power of the group, the energetic excitement of the mob, engulfed everyone. We are all susceptible, he concluded. That is the point. Ellul warned us about being beguiled into nonfreedom. He predicted a time when the power of technological totalitarianism would engulf everything, including our minds, our senses, and our intuitions, and thus gain our loyalty and compliance.

My fear (and I hope I am wrong) is that even many of us who have studied Ellul for years have possibly been beguiled by recent narratives that we have trusted without sufficient critique. If this is the case (and how does one ever know except by hindsight), then we are truly in a state of nonfreedom. But we should take heart here. Ellul explains, at the close of *The Technological Bluff*, that we must begin our journey toward freedom by first recognizing our nonfreedom. This recognition is itself an encouragement. But it takes humility. The powers would have us remain oblivious to the state of our nonfreedom. In fact, the powers present us with the compelling lie that we are currently free: free in our thinking, free in our choosing, free in our bodies, and so forth. “Peace, peace,’ they say, when there is no peace” (Jer. 6:14). This is the essence of addiction, is it not? We tell ourselves it is best not to change but to sustain our habit, since we need it to hold everything together. Things would fall apart otherwise. Our enslavement is viewed as our best condition.

But what an effective lie! In actuality, things are falling apart. Diabolically, which literally means “thrown apart.” The unrecovered addict creates constant chaos in his micro system, harming himself and others. So it is in larger technological systems that promise protection and salvation: things are thrown about and people are harmed. Every school in the past two years, from preschool to higher education, has been thrown about and pulled apart due to constant and often needless restrictions. What is “constant” here is perpetual flux. It is a recipe for destabilizing communities of all sorts. I am currently doing facilitation work for an apartment complex of two hundred mothers and children in transition, working with staff teams. The pandemic lockdowns have created unimaginable chaos and breakdown for this community. It is as if an emotional tornado periodically blows through.

Meanwhile, I have rich friends who have told me that life in the past two years has been better than ever for them.

My main point in writing this challenge (to myself as well) is that powers embedded in social institutions can have a powerful effect on people without their being aware, and due to this effect, the last two years has allowed for an unprecedented force to reshape our modern world. One expression of the power of hidden powers is the widespread *mass formation* that has gripped people worldwide. This concept of collective psychosis was studied by pioneering psychologists such as Freud, Jung, Allport, and Le Bon. But now that Belgian scholar Mattias Desmet has applied mass formation to our current situation of fear-based news about COVID-19, the fact-checking industry is uniformly dismissing this theory and perspective as ill founded. We are back to the addict and the family system in which they function. There can be no confrontation. That's why everyone else walks on eggshells. Nobody wants to upset the balance. Ah, the (pseudo) "balance of power." The power of such a system thus suppresses any form of resistance. And this is why dialogue itself, in today's world, is paralyzed.

What then shall we do? Once we recognize how anything with political and economic power can be "heightened" or "magnified" by spiritual powers, we can consider the ways of disarming the powers. This is why we don't fight "fire with fire." It is not against "flesh and blood" that we fight. There are undetectable dimensions that lead us into a different kind of struggle. Again, the term *spiritual* need not mean supernatural beings, but rather fallen forces that feed upon cultural forms and rely upon pseudo-sacredness to function in human society. "Pretentious high things." The gods of idols need hosts to exist. Again, they are powerful in a false way, yet are limited in a true way. Our task is to desacralize them the same way one would disarm their addiction in a twelve-step program. The reason that AA programs are so successful is precisely because they include a spiritual dimension to overcome unmanageable power.

A spiritual orientation also reminds us that the powers are eventually self-destructive. Pretentious things cannot last forever. Because they promote cultures of death, they are driven toward death. At some point the lid comes off. The technological bluff is called. Lung cancer catches up with

the smoker. DDT, promoted as “safe and effective” for two decades, kills worms and birds. GMO’s are not the starvation saviors that they were made out to be, since they are part of co-dependent systems that bring death to living microbial soil. Vaccines, like the experimental hepatitis ones that a private pharmaceutical company and the US government bribed my Native American friend to vaccinate her toddler with, are linked to adverse effects in brain development in children (and in her daughter). And now our bodies worldwide are rapidly becoming co-dependent on genetically modified injections that upstage our natural immune systems.

The prophet seers, though, see the fall of the Great City before the demise happens. In *real time* they see through things to the way things truly are, while most people are in denial. They lament while they deconstruct. “Your merchants were the world’s important people / By your magic spell [*pharmakeia*] all the nations were led astray” (Rev. 18:23).

Resisting the subtle and beguiling power of hidden powers requires a spiritual orientation as well as a social one. It requires prayer and prophetic insight, both of which can be done only in partnership with an invisible but real God who is never daunted by the powers and whose mode of operation is through paradoxical weakness. And it requires socially and locally responsible action. By no longer acting in accordance with the dictates of institutionalized powers, we effectively “boycott” them. We act by alternative values and alternative choices.

As I wrote in my opening article to this *Forum* issue, “Ellul’s call to responsibility matches perfectly with Dawn’s call to vulnerability.” Ultimately, our *being* in the world is more important than our *doing*. The powers would have us nervously act in any number of ways, preferring that we never rest in the truths of a Higher Power who sourced human life and empowered people to live in freedom without compulsion or addiction.

The challenge? If we intuit that we may have been drawn into a narrative of official misinformation that was constructed in a way to deflect the charge of misinformation by calling every other opposing piece of information as misinformation, how do we regain our bearings? What truth do we trust? I recognize that confronting the possibility of being misled is troubling to us.

This is not an easy barge to turn. A lot is at stake here. But this is ultimately a challenge to be humble. None of us has or will have complete knowledge or certainty. But we do have our intuitions about what is true and good and right.

I return to my Native American friend whose daughter was vaccinated in 1992. She was told it was safe, but not told it was part of a study that used Indigenous people in South Dakota to see if the vaccine was truly safe. She was pressured numerous times to comply. She told me how at first she had a strong intuition to resist. But she needed the extra money. Some of the little girls were given perfumes if they participated. (Similar tactics have happened with recent Covid vaccine programs.) My friend now lives with lifelong regret for not following her intuition, due to the adverse effects on her daughter that were observable within one day.

Does intuition count for something when you navigate your way in death-culture systems? Yes. For some people, it is the best resource they have. But powers hiding in media institutions, through techniques that would take another article of this length to fully describe, are eroding people's capacity to trust their intuitions. In a way, this is a war against nature. Our intuitions stem from our capacity to survive in and with nature. One of the greatest challenges to us all is to rediscover the power of our intuitions in times when the powers are eroding our capacity to sense things for ourselves, lest we be free and responsible for our own lives. But we also have intellects. And we can thank Jacques Ellul for helping us to sharpen that faculty as best we can as we think about our role and presence in the modern world.

Imagining Away the Flesh: A Review of *La Technique et la chair*

Carl Mitcham

Cérézuelle, Daniel. *La Technique et la chair*. Paris: L'Échappée, 2021.

This ordered collection of fifteen essays from a twenty-five-year period, together with a synthetic introduction and conclusion, is by one of the most consistently thoughtful members of that informal community of scholars dedicated to extending and deepening the critical engagement with technology pioneered by Jacques Ellul. Indeed, it begins with an epigraph from *La Technique*: “There is no technique in itself, but in its relentless march it is accompanied by the human being, without which it is nothing.” As Cérézuelle immediately elaborates:

The essays presented in this collection are inspired by a political pre-occupation about which I must warn the reader. Much has been written on modern technique [technology] and its dynamism, but relatively little on the subjective springs of this dynamism. Yet the question of the technical imagination seems to me decisive not only for understanding the genesis of the runaway of the two previous centuries but also for tackling the future and putting technology back in its place as far as possible. (5)

It is then the ways in which the human being accompanies technology that is the overriding theme.

Note: In what follows I translate the French *technique* variously as *technique* or *technology*, depending on what seems to me most context-appropriate. I should also apologize for any mistranslations; my knowledge of French is no more than a crude reading knowledge.

Part one, “Approaches to the Spirit of Technicism,” the longest, is composed of seven chapters. Chapter 1, on “Technology and Desire According to Jean Brun,” reveals Brun as equal to Ellul in his influence. Cérézuelle finds Brun’s *Le Rêve et la machine* (1992, *The Dream and the Machine*) especially illuminating. “In *Le Rêve et la machine*, Brun endeavors to show that the human being first dreamed of techniques before realizing them and putting them into practice, and that the history of technique is governed by a ‘metaphysical dream’” (Cérézuelle, 19; Brun, 131). This metaphysical or ontological dream is one of escape from the human condition. “Machines are both daughters and mothers of fantasies that we should call metaphysical. [...] The utilitarian function of the machine is only its diurnal force; we must unveil its nocturnal face” (*Le Rêve et la machine*, 14). (The second quotation is from an English lecture that Cérézuelle gave on Brun, referenced below in the appendix to my review.)

Chapter 2, on “Technology as Myth,” finds the ontological dream expressed especially in the aspiration to create an artificial intelligence. Chapter 3 considers “The Genealogy of Technosciences According to Dominique Janicaud.” Like Brun, Janicaud is little known in the English-speaking philosophical world. But his *La Puissance du rationnel* (1985; translated as *The Powers of the Rational*, 1994), on which Cérézuelle focuses, offers a phenomenology of the effects on rationality of techno-scientific power that is meant to challenge and correct the interpretation of technology developed by Martin Heidegger.

Chapter 4, “Amor Fati: Aspects of Technological Violence,” is dedicated to Brun. The theme here is quite simple: “The more our power grows, the more difficult it is to control its effects” (67). Chapter 5, “Virtual Existences: About the Movies *The Matrix* and *Avalon*,” uses contemporary film to help illuminate the violence in dreams and myths in the spirit of technicism. *The Matrix* (1999), created by the transwomen sisters Lana and Lilly Wachowski, and *Avalon* (2001), a Polish-language Japanese film by Mamoru Oshii and Kazunori Itō, reveal multiple levels of transnational mythic appeal and transgressive attraction of the virtual. Cérézuelle is particularly good in the use he makes of popular media to explore the subjective springs

of technological dynamism and the ways that human beings accompany advances in the progressively engineered and engineering lifeworld.

“Metaphysics of Accident,” chapter 6, draws on fiction, especially Edgar Allan Poe’s 1845 short story “The Angel of the Odd” (translated by Baudelaire into French) and Thomas De Quincey’s “The English Mail-Coach” (from 1849). This deft twenty-five-page analysis references these and other examples of imaginative literature attempting to come to terms with the monstrous technological changes of the nineteenth century, to explore a transformation of the classical notion of accident, as that which is not essential, into that which has become essential. In our technological world, automobile traffic deaths of more than one million persons per year (considerably more than on the battlefields) have become accepted as inherent aspects of contemporary life. “How is it possible that what is precisely called a traffic ‘accident’ could have become one of the general features of industrial societies?” (107).

Chapter 7, “Technique and Disembodiment: ‘Art’ as Stupefying. About the Klimt-Klee Show at the Bordeaux Submarine Base,” the longest and most ambitious cultural interpretation of the book, reviews a traveling “immersive exhibition” in his hometown. An abandoned World War II naval installation was turned into a multimedia art-installation “experience” that Cérézuelle found not just “very interesting, but disturbing” (123) and “literally stupefying” (124). In this extended reflective attempt to come to terms with the mediatization of contemporary life he draws not only again on Jean Brun but also on the philosophy of culture of Ernst Cassirer and especially the writing of contemporary American culture critic Matthew B. Crawford, *The World Beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction* (2015; French translation *Contact: Pourquoi nous avons perdu le monde et comment le retrouver*, 2020).

Part two, “The Technological Surge and Its Disorganizing Effects,” is focused more on particulars. Two chapters deal with specific technologies: Chapter 8, “Reflections on the Autonomy of Technology: The Case of Biotechnologies,” is the only chapter also available in an English version (see Paul T. Durbin, ed., *Technology and Contemporary Life* [Dordrecht: Kluwer,

1988), 129–44). Chapter 9, “Ethics and Information,” deals with the digital manipulation of information.

Chapter 10, “Technology and the ‘Ground Floor of Civilization,’” reprises an argument that Cérézuelle has developed at greater length in *Pour un autre développement social: Au-delà des formalismes techniques et économiques* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1996). A related presentation of the distinction between formal and informal education, and the necessity of the latter as a foundation for the former, can be found in Cérézuelle’s “The Limits of Formal Education: A Report from France,” *Technology in Society* 20 (1998), 307–15.

“A Blind Spot: Reflections on Non-Material Organizational Technologies,” chapter 11, is in one respect the most original contribution, in terms of extending the sociological analysis of technique in the spirit of Ellul. Indeed, it begins with a quotation from Ellul: “Organization is precisely technique itself.” It is also the second longest or, if you add the pages of notes, actually the longest in the volume. It is the only chapter that has not previously been published in some form. Cérézuelle’s argument is that non-material or social technologies of organization are central to technosocial life in contemporary society and deserve more critical analysis than they are commonly given. Cérézuelle sees this chapter as pointing forward to chapters 13 and 14.

Chapter 12, “Political Problem or Problem of Civilization? Remarks on Hurricane Katrina,” analyzes an American disaster, often presented as one caused by nature, and argues that it was equally if not even more so the weakening of the ground floor of civilization described in chapter 10.

But it is part three, “The Flesh, Technique and Time,” with three studies, that is the most philosophically significant part of the book. Chapter 13, the second-longest chapter, “On *Ensarkosis Logou*: Toward the Critique of Technical Society According to Bernard Charbonneau, Jacques Ellul, and Ivan Illich,” examines three theological analyses of depersonalization: Charbonneau’s analysis of relationships between freedom and incarnation, Illich’s reflections on the humiliation of flesh, and Ellul’s understanding of incarnation. Recognition of commonalities between Charbonneau and

Ellul are common; one aspect of Cérézuelle's originality here is to draw Illich into the theological dialogue about incarnation or embodiment and to connect it with the distinctly modern problematic of time. Chapter 14, "A New Theodicy? Remarks on the Sociology of Technology of Bruno Latour," offers a more critical perspective on another French thinker who is a large presence in contemporary discourse—much larger, in fact, than Charbonneau, Illich, or Ellul—questioning the adequacy of Latour's analysis of the contemporary condition.

Chapter 15, "Technological Time and Human Time: Reflections on the Societal Challenges of the Technological Surge," returns to, reiterates, and draws further implications from a number of themes in previous chapters—the metaphysics of accident, acceleration in social change, chaos, economic development—especially in relation to notions of responsibility.

The effort to civilize our techniques, that is, to evaluate them in order to make them compatible with natural balances and with our values, comes up against the dynamism of techno-scientific development, which animates our societies and constantly upsets our world. [...] Countless small advances permanently modify our action plans, calling for other innovations to correct the sometimes destabilizing effects of the first. [...] This dynamic growth specific to the science-technology-industry complex makes it exceptionally difficult to control social and environmental effects. The speed of innovation and diffusion of technology threatens to constantly overwhelm the capacity for analysis and adaptation necessary to civilize it. (339)

The conclusion, "Cultivating the Sense of the Flesh to Demythologize Technique," revisits the genesis of the runaway of the two previous centuries and especially what might be done in the future to return technology, as far as possible, to its proper place in civilization. What is fundamental, Cérézuelle argues, is "taking into account the carnal dimensions of existence":

Technology gives human beings a power to act without which there can be no freedom; it is inseparable from their mode of being in the world. However, because people are beings of flesh, their relationship to the world is not only intellectual or operative, but also affective and symbolic, and these various dimensions of the human

mode of existence reverberate on each other. If there are technical and intellectual dimensions of freedom, there are also necessarily affective and symbolic dimensions. Affectivity is a way of relating to the world that is just as important as action or knowledge. Thanks to technical know-how, human beings have the possibility of reacting to and modifying their material environment and creating their own environment. But the quantitative multiplication of consumer goods, for example, is insufficient for the new environment to promote effective action and allow people to exercise their power over things. Because they involve the whole person, and because they participate in the construction of a world, material and spatial conditions in which people live are not neutral; on the contrary, they are of utmost importance for freedom and for the spiritual life and cannot be assessed properly simply in terms of power and efficiency; they must satisfy all registers of human sensibility. If we pay attention to the whole incarnate person, then the affective, aesthetic dimensions of our relationship to the world cannot be ignored as inessential subjective preferences. Certainly, when we conceive the human as pure subjectivity, susceptible of an infinity of preferences, the question of the value of the human sensory relationship to the world remains undecidable and frivolous. However, once we recognize humans as first of all beings of flesh, we can have a guideline for examining whether the technical or institutional environment that it produces is indeed commensurate with it. (367–68)

An appendix offers “Some Clarifications on the Notion of Flesh.” As my own appendix, I might note that a good English-language introduction to the broad sweep of C  r  zuelle’s thought is a special issue of the *Colorado School of Mines Quarterly* 100, no. 2 (2000), on “The Costs of the Technologization of Life from a European Point of View,” which includes six lectures that he delivered as Hennebach Visiting Professor at the Colorado School of Mines in 1999–2000. This issue is now available in PDF form at ellul.org.

Review of *Robot Theology: Old Questions through New Media*

Jack Esselink

Smith, Joshua K. *Robot Theology: Old Questions through New Media*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2022.

There has been an increase in books about the intersection of technology and philosophy and that discuss the societal and ethical effects of technology. There are not many books that discuss the intersection of theology and technology, but that is changing as well. This book by Joshua K. Smith discusses the impact of artificial intelligence (AI) and robots on our lives. Smith, a theologian and pastor in Mississippi, wrote his PhD thesis on robot rights. This book is a continuation of his research but is intended for a broad audience. The goal of this book is to approach the ethical and metaphysical assumptions of AI and robots through a theological lens and to build a bridge between robot ethics and Christian ethics.

Smith argues that robots and AI are new media that will dramatically shape and influence our world and expose old, existential questions for humanity. It is important that Christians participate in the discussion about the design of these technologies, as “Christian scholarship provides a rich body of literature to help social and computer scientists think through care and the responsibility of innovation” (5). The book contains no direct references to Ellul’s work, but Smith clearly points out how AI and robots will shape our world and how Christian should be present in this, themes that align with Ellul’s claims about technology and the role that Christians should play in the discussion of it.

The author starts with a description of how humans have tried to overcome their limitations and finiteness. Humans have always tried to use technology to do so, and Smith explains that technology is not simply a tool but has a *telos* and is inherently ethical. Artificial technology, both embodied (i.e., robots) and disembodied, will interact more and more with humans as friend, servant, or caretaker, which has numerous ethical implications that are explored in various chapters. One of the most helpful contributions of the book is the discussion of what Smith calls the “revenge of metaphysics” (16), in which he exposes the metaphysical assumptions that underpin AI and robots and that are based in evolutionary naturalism. As Smith puts it, “Thinking about AI and robotics is built upon a mechanical metaphysic, which means there is no room for thinking about nonmaterial objects or the supernatural” (37).

Underlying this instrumental view is the belief in power and progress, which is often veiled in eloquent Silicon Valley rhetoric but may have serious ethical consequences and could lead to dehumanization and marginalization. Smith underscores the importance of having the societal conversation about how AI and robots should be designed and integrated in our society in order to contribute to a better world for humans. He advocates, as Ellul might say, that it is important for Christian AI practitioners, legal scholars, theologians, and ethicists to take part in this discussion, since Christian anthropology and ethics offer great resources about what it means to be human and how we should relate to the other.

It is inevitable that robots and AI will become our new neighbors in the future and part of our moral circle. One interesting proposition that Smith develops is that AI and robots should not have moral agency but moral patiency, which would create room for robots and AI to have personhood. He points to how humans have gone about treating their domestic animals for the last millennium, and how animal ethics has developed. Smith foresees a similar path for how we will adopt robots and AI into our moral circle. He argues that the biblical notion of personhood can offer nonhumans legal personhood—which does not mean that they have equal moral standing with humans. Smith argues that “there may, in the present and future, be ethical reasons to grant certain qualified entities negative rights and protec-

tions because it may positively impact human and environmental flourishing to do so” (45). Granting legal rights to AI and robots is an application of theological ethics, as it protects the creators and creation and still leaves room for innovation within boundaries.

The last three chapters of the book delve into specific topics in the application of AI, such as friendship, companion robots, and the use of AI and robots in pastoral ministry. These chapters can be read independently and are less well developed than the main arguments described above. Chapter 6, “Robots, Racism, and Theology,” is an exception and is particularly well written. In it Smith explores the topic of race and of how existing systemic biases in society are amplified due to the biased datasets that are used in training AI and robots. He argues, founded on the biblical notion of what it means to be human, ethnic diversity was a reality of Creation (101) and all people are created in the image of God. We should not let AI and robots become new slaves.

As an AI practitioner and theologian myself, I highly recommend this book for anyone who is interested in the intersection of AI and theology. Smith does a great job in describing the ethical and theological questions in this field. Despite being written for a general audience, the author often presupposes a knowledge of metaphysics, which might make some parts difficult to understand. His technical description of how AI works is also too narrow, in my opinion. All in all, however, this book offers a helpful introduction to what it means to be present in a modern world with these new smart neighbors called AI and robots.

Review of *To Will & To Do: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*

Peter Anderson

Ellul, Jacques. *To Will & To Do: An Introduction to Christian Ethics*, trans. Jacob Marques Rollison. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020 (vol. 1), 2021 (vol. 2).

The re-introduction of Jacques Ellul's *To Will & To Do* in a two-volume English edition supplies a welcome opportunity for anglophone readers to explore and deepen their understanding of the significance and originality of Ellul's theological ethics. As the prior English translation included only a single volume, the inclusion of the newly discovered second volume opens up additional content and insights to Ellul's foundational ethics text. I will not repeat Rollison's accounting of the providential circumstances leading to the addition of the second volume nor restate Rollison's excellent summaries of each volume. Rather, this review will first offer an overview of the general contours of the work and then call attention to two of the important themes that are deepened and widened in Ellul's ethics as a direct result of this new translation and the addition of a second volume.

To contextualize the points of contribution, it is vital to note that *To Will & To Do* stands as Ellul's introduction to his ethical project, offering the sociological, theological, and cultural foundations of his theological ethics. As such, he traces a history of moral systems, assessing the socio-cultural impact of what Ellul terms "the morality of the world," that is, humanity's attempts to know and understand the good apart from God. He explores various ways that humans have formed ethical systems and pursued the good, while also unpacking the impossible necessity of a Christian ethic determined and shaped by the revealed will of God in Christ Jesus, where-

by the Christian serves and loves God with heart, soul, and mind. The work exemplifies the dialectic methodology that Ellul uses so frequently. Apart from part three, volume one represents a more negative, critical description of what Christian ethics is not, while volume two seeks out a more positive, constructive description of what Christian ethics is. Broadly speaking, volume one deconstructs, and volume two reconstructs.

Ellul structures this work in five parts across two volumes, the first three sections contained in volume one and sections four and five coming in volume two. Section one outlines the origins of moral systems through the story of Adam and Eve, highlighting the Fall's discontinuous effects on human morality. Section two supplies a socio-historical review of insufficient moral systems and starting points for ethical reflection, and section three articulates an insistence on a truly Christian ethics rooted in the revelation of Jesus Christ. As a previously undiscovered and unpublished manuscript, the newly added second volume uses the initial history and analysis of volume one to extend the critique into more specific examples and toward a more fully developed constructive analysis of what Ellul calls the conditions and characteristics of Christian ethics in part four, and the content of a Christian ethic in part five. The first volume's evaluation of history, currents, and possibilities organically extends into the more specified and constructive project of the second.

This journey through the foundations of Ellul's ethical project elicits a joyful longing in the reader: joy at the extension and elucidation that the second volume offers, and longing for Ellul's project to have been fully realized across not simply *To Will & To Do* and *The Ethics of Holiness* but also his unfinished explorations of the ethics of relationship and holiness. Nevertheless, the addition of volume two to the English edition offers several helpful clarifications and extensions to Ellul's ethics to an anglophone audience that the prior single-volume English editions left underdeveloped. For example, the technical morality critiqued in volume one, in which ends become means and success subverts the true moral *telos*, receives an alternative vision in volume two, where Ellul describes a truly Christian ethic as a morality motivated by love, hope, freedom, and incarnational living. Ellul describes Christian ethics quite beautifully as an ethics of "means" in order

to describe a moral imagination whereby the Christian does good for its Christologically shaped sake more than for the outcomes or results (social status, power, wealth, acknowledgement, etc.) that a given set of choices or commitments produces. As another example, the impossibility and necessity of a Christian ethic, covered in volume one, receives clarifying direction in the second volume's identification of the seemingly contradictory tensions of a Christian ethic lived in the "already, not yet" time-between-the-times.

The addition of the second volume also nuances Ellul's theological and biblical foundations that he insists on in the early part of volume one. Specifically, since Christian ethics must be revelational and incarnational (a repeated critique that he levels against moral systems and approaches), ethics are always prophetic and eschatological. As Ellul describes it, the prophetic work of consolation, exhortation, and edification exists in the movement of the Spirit and within the boundaries of biblical revelation. As such, expressions and embodiments of divine truth most evidently displayed in Christ are enacted in a given place, time, and setting by the people of God united with Christ. The addition of volume two allows for a fuller articulation of this principle and clarifies Ellul's thinking here.

Finally, the addition of the second volume provides new insights on Ellul's development of the analogy of faith (*analogia fidei*). Through the analogy of faith, Ellul offers an important account of the complex ways that doctrine and ethics connect, diverge, shape, and engage with one another within his own theological ethics. Out of what is a kind of theological interpretation of Scripture and a final statement on the biblical foundations of Christian ethics, Ellul indicates that Scripture offers ethical guidance only out of the recognition of a Christocentric hermeneutic that acknowledges the complete, yet hidden, victory of God for the world.

While Ellul's theological ethics receive significant extension in the additional volume of *To Will & To Do*, there are too few moments where the complexity and disparate parts of Ellul's theological ethics come together into a cohesive whole within these two volumes. To say it another way, Ellul's theological ethics are too often a collection of extravagant, elegant threads of insight and analysis that independently offer singular contribu-

tions to theological ethics but lose additional explanatory power when not more tightly integrated. For example, it is not immediately clear how Ellul's development of a specifically Christian ethic in part four, identifiable as radically revolutionary, realistic, demystifying, and prayerful, integrates with a Christian ethic of contradiction defined by purity and love, or why such an integration offers a clearer articulation of an incarnational, distinctly Christian ethic. This is not to say such integration is impossible or inaccessible, but an observation that the work of identifying and articulating the integration is not immediately clear from Ellul himself and seemingly falls to Ellul scholars and careful readers to explore instead. In short, the impact of Ellul's theological ethics would only increase in beauty if drawn more closely together into an integrated whole.

The peaks and valleys of Ellul's method of writing and thinking are on full display within the overall flow and development of these two volumes. As such, the necessary complexity of Ellul's theological ethics serves as both its greatest strength and its clearest weakness for bridging the gap between his incisive contributions and the Church's need for accessible, fresh paradigms for moral excellence and spiritual wisdom as she navigates a fractured, violent, and challenging world. Yet the new translation and the addition of a previously unavailable second volume opens additional doors into Ellul's thought, because the content of volume two provides immediate source material for reflection and research. As such, any student of Ellul or even of ethics in general would be well served to read and reflect on the insights supplied by Rollison's new translation of *To Will & To Do* for the sake of deepening the Christian moral imagination and strengthening the living faith of the Church.

About the Contributors

Peter Anderson is assistant dean and assistant professor of theology and ethics at Grand Canyon University and Grand Canyon Theological Seminary in Phoenix, Arizona. His research interests include virtue, moral formation, and institutional theory, with recent work exploring the intersection of Jacques Ellul's technological morality in popular culture.

Jack Esselink holds an MA in theology from Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam. His current interests include AI and the intersection between deepfakes, extreme beliefs, and ethics.

Ted Lewis is executive director of IJES and the coordinator of reprints and new translations of Ellul books for Wipf and Stock. His article "The Tower of Babel and the Hymn of Kenosis: Counterpoint Texts for Ellul" appeared in *Ellul and the Bible*. Ted's primary vocation is in the fields of restorative justice and conflict resolution. He is a trainer and consultant at the Center for Restorative Justice & Peacemaking (University of Minnesota, Duluth). In 2017 Ted founded the Restorative Church Project, an initiative of Central Plains Mennonite Conference.

Carl Mitcham is professor emeritus of humanities, arts, and social sciences at Colorado School of Mines and international visiting professor of philosophy of technology at Renmin University of China. His most recent book is *Steps Toward a Philosophy of Engineering* (2020). He credits Daniel C  r  zuelle with being his primary guide when trying to think through technology after Ellul.

Marva Dawn Sandberg (1948–2021) was an internationally known author and teacher. She wrote twenty books, many of which were translated into other languages. She taught courses and lectured at universities and seminaries, and through the organization she founded, Christians Equipped for Ministry. Marva held an undergraduate degree in English, four master's degrees, and a PhD from the University of Notre Dame. She was a life-long Ellul scholar, friend of IJES, and *Ellul Forum* contributor. In the words of David Gill, "she was a force of nature, humble but brilliant, insightful, impactful, and unfailingly kind and generous."

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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