

On Freedom, Love, and Power

By Jacques Ellul. Ed./trans. Willem H. Vanderburg
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Reviewed by Ben Kautzer

Though marginalized in certain academic circles, Jacques Ellul (1912-1994) undoubtedly remains one of the most significant social critics of the 20th century. A prolific writer, Ellul produced 48 books and well over 600 articles in which he critiqued the hegemonic power of technology in contemporary society and its corrosive impact on human life, culture, ecology, and religious faith.¹ Fueled by a reductive scientism and undergirded by a mythos of insatiable progress, modernity has inaugurated a seismic shift towards what Ellul calls *la technique*—an unquestioned technical totality that underlies, orients, and mediates all human relationships with others and the environment. As the secular religion of the modern age, *technique*, argues Ellul, has indeed *become* our new environment—the life milieu of humanity.²

His iconoclastic work in history, sociology, politics, and theology seeks to call into question the pervasiveness of this technological mindset and its implications for our ability to conceive human flourishing (in both the physical and spiritual sense of the word).³ It should come as no surprise that Ellul's work provided a foundational point of departure for questions Ivan Illich wrestled with throughout his own life.⁴

¹ For a helpful overview of Ellul's life and work, see the introduction to this volume by Willem Vanderburg, "Introduction," in Jacques Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, comp., ed. and trans. Willem Vanderburg (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), vii-xxi. In addition, a clear synopsis of Ellul's major books can be found in Marva Dawn, "Introduction," in Marva Dawn, ed., *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Early Articles by Jacques Ellul that Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 1-9.

² For Ellul's critique of *technique*, see his trilogy: *The Technological Society*, trans. John Wilkinson (New York: Knopf, 1964); *The Technological System*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Continuum, 1980); and *The Technological Bluff*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

³ Ellul's work has largely followed two fundamental trajectories: philosophy of technology and biblical theology, both of which came to have a lasting impact on Ivan Illich. See David C. Menninger,

On Freedom, Love and Power represents a timely and exciting addition to Ellul's already impressive corpus. In this book, Willem Vanderburg has compiled and edited a previously unpublished series of lectures on Jewish and Christian Scripture given by Ellul in 1974.⁵ These lectures explore in great depth some of the most creative and controversial aspects of Ellul's biblical theology. His aim is to recover a fresh reading of Scripture beyond reductive attempts to convert and accommodate Christianity into either a flat religious institution or a series of pre-packaged theological platitudes that can be wielded against the questioning demands of faith. Through careful attentiveness to the historical, linguistic, and symbolic contours of the biblical text itself, Ellul rediscovers the startling vitality of a gospel that is "an anti-morality, an anti-religion, and an anti-metaphysics."⁶ For Ellul, these Scriptures rupture the closed systems of our secular age and position the reader before a mysterious world beyond human reckoning. Ellul's willingness to be interrogated, to be called into question by the text, provides an intimate glimpse into his own existential wrestling with what it means to have an authentic religious faith in a world dominated by the "principalities and powers" of *technique*.

Following a fascinating introduction by Vanderburg, *On Freedom, Love, and Power* divides into separate seminars in which Ellul gives a theological commentary on four interconnected books of the Bible: Genesis, Job, Matthew, and John. It should be noted that Ellul did not originally present this material from a podium in a crowded

"Jacques Ellul: A Tempered Profile," *The Review of Politics* 37, no. 2 (1975): 235-246; Alastair Hulbert, "Don Quixote in the Contemporary Global Tragicomedy," in *The Challenges of Ivan Illich: A Collective Reflection*, ed. Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 168-169. On the "iconoclastic" nature of Ellul's writings, see Willem Vanderburg, "The Iconoclasm of Jacques Ellul: A Call to Freedom in Our Age," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 18, no. 2 (1998), 76-86.

⁴ Ivan Illich, "An Address to 'Master Jacques'," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 14, no. 2 (1994), 65-68.

⁵ Vanderburg, a lifelong student of Ellul, is the director of the Centre for Technology and Social Development at the University of Toronto and a significant philosopher and cultural critic in his own right.

⁶ Vanderburg, "Introduction," xii; cf. Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, 64-68.

lecture hall, but around a dining room table in the company of a few handpicked friends. These talks took place in the context of open conversation and intellectual debate between a teacher and his students. As a result, we don't find a clean or perfectly polished argument at the heart of any one seminar. Instead, each investigation unfolds layer by layer. This should in no way discount the fact that Ellul's book is an incredible achievement. Through close readings, reinterpretations, unanticipated connections, and a subtle underlying murmuring of dialogic exchange, a remarkably coherent analysis of faith, hope, power, and the social and spiritual malaise of western civilization emerges from the splayed threads of discourse. I suggest that it is precisely this honest, convivial, and unguarded context which clears the air of pretense and allows room for profundity of thought. Vanderburg invites us to take a seat at Ellul's table and enter into the intensity of this dynamic conversation.⁷

In the opening section, Ellul tackles the first few chapters of Genesis. In an effort to pry these texts free from their captivity to ideologies of religion, morality, and magic, Ellul argues that Genesis is neither a scientific account of the creation of the world, nor a foundational narrative for the institutionalization of religious law. On the contrary, Genesis contains a nuanced theology of God's relationship to the world as one who enters into history and into a relationship with humanity, raising dust to life and saturating the created order with an irreducible sense of mystery. Leaning heavily on ancient Jewish exegesis and paying careful attention to the metaphorical

⁷ Ivan Illich frequently emphasized the value of rethinking sites of genuine learning beyond the purview of educational institutions. For Illich, gathering around a table for a meal, wine, conversation, and open debate represents the kind of space in which the mutual quest for truth can flourish. In *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), he writes, "I wanted to see if it would be possible to create truly, deeply committed human ties on the occasion and by the means of common investigation. And I also wanted to show how the search for truth can be pursued in a unique way around a dining table or over a glass of wine and not in the lecture hall" (148). In many ways, *On Freedom, Love, and Power* offers a performative embodiment of the potential power and vitality of an intellectual exchange born at such a dining room table.

nature of the Hebrew language, Ellul attempts to rethink the relationship of creation and Darwinism, sin and domination, mythology and the world-making nature of symbolic narrative. Despite being over 30 years old, Ellul's commentary has a prophetic edge which will undoubtedly continue to have lasting implications for contemporary debates over science and religion.⁸

The second section turns to the closing chapters of the book of Job. Here Ellul brings to the surface deep philosophical and theological questions about life and death, evil and human suffering, freedom and responsibility. The presence of evil in our world and our own complicity in its violence can all too readily reduce hope to despair. Ellul challenges the notion that God watches from a distance the drama of human misery. He discovers in these texts a divine love that intervenes, pursues, abides, and prepares human reconciliation. Of course, Ellul knows this matter is complicated. There is no quick abdication of Job's questions to an anemic theodicy. "The Bible has always been a book of questions and not one that provides pseudo-answers to help us feel secure."⁹ Yet wrestling in the midst of insecurity, uncertainty, and the dark night of the soul, Ellul sees the sparks of authentic faith born anew.

In the third seminar, Ellul analyzes Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of Heaven in the Gospel of Matthew. Drawing a distinction between the "Kingdom of *God*" (kingship of the Creator, view from eternity, promise and fulfillment) and the "Kingdom of *Heaven*" (interruption into the present of God's kingly reign in the person of Jesus), Ellul argues that the revolutionary thrust of the Christian gospel is not to be found in an institution—whether a church or a secular utopian project—nor in a juridical moral edifice, but rather in a transformative way of life constituted by

⁸ Indeed, in a recently published essay Vanderburg has already begun to explore the implications of Ellul's exegesis of Genesis on contemporary debates over science and religion. See Willem Vanderburg, "How the Science Versus Religion Debate Has Missed the Point of Genesis 1 and 2: Jacques Ellul (1912-1994)," *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 30, no. 6 (2010), 430-445.

⁹ Ellul, *On Freedom, Love, and Power*, 145.

freedom and love, and oriented to the inbreaking reign of God. Throughout this seminar, Ellul traces in these parables five aspects of this Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus: (1) it is not a territory, but a force in action; (2) it is not a self-aggrandizing power, but a hidden power—a kind of subversive weakness; (3) it is not a human construct, but a synergistic fusion of the actions of God and the responsive actions of humanity; (4) it is not a legal or moral code, but a justice shepherded by love; (5) it is not law of this world, but a revelation of freedom diametrically opposed to a human logic of merit, value, and expectation. The recovery of these values highlights the extent to which Christianity has so often subverted its fidelity to its Messiah. Framed in this way, the Kingdom of Heaven overturns the nice and neat religious distinctions that “safely” delineate insiders from outsiders. It names an interruption in the present that calls forth “service, involvement, responsibility, and hope” in the face of modern idols erected before the powers of *technique*.¹⁰

Finally, Ellul examines in a few dense pages the equally dense prologue to the Gospel of John. Here, he returns to questions raised in the first seminar and analyzes the implications of a Christian reworking of the Genesis account in light of the incarnation of Christ. To round off the narrative flow of the book, Vanderburg offers as a concluding epilogue a summary sketch of Ellul’s commentary on the book of Revelation.¹¹

Reading this text and meditating on its themes of love and freedom, its emphasis on the centrality of the Christian theology of the incarnation, its sharp critique of the institutionalization of the faith and the subsequent subjugation of

¹⁰ Ibid, 151.

¹¹ For a fuller treatment of this material, see Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, trans. George W. Schreiner (New York: Seabury, 1977). Vanderburg, in the “Introduction,” indicates that his reason for including this paraphrased section is “because it so beautifully recaps the ultimate love story as the good news in an age in which many are in desperate need of real hope, real faith, and real love” (ix). In this sense, this section gives the book a sense of completeness. However, Vanderburg’s summary, on the whole, fails to communicate the same level of passion and depth as Ellul’s own voice.

Christianity to the blowing ideologies of power, one cannot help but sense a deep resonance between Ellul and the later writings of Illich. Toward the end of his life, Illich began to articulate a specific religious framework that had come to inform, if not *determine*, the basic unifying trajectory of his life's work. In his final interviews with David Cayley, Illich traces the roots of what he perceived as the malaise of western civilization to the "corruption" of Christianity into a religious ideology and a morality of obligation. Like Ellul, Illich argues that the incarnation—as the pivoting axis of human history—opened up an unprecedented dimension of love, at once subversive, unbounded, and "highly ambiguous because of the way in which it explodes certain universal assumptions about the conditions under which love are possible."¹² Family, race, culture, wealth, and nation no longer concretely demarcate the bounds of the neighbor. Illich maintains that in Christ I am beckoned into a startling freedom to choose whom I will love and where I will love. "And this deeply threatens the traditional basis for ethics, which was always an *ethnos*, an historically given 'we' which precedes any pronunciation of the word 'I'."¹³

Unfortunately, there is a darker side to this story as well. Illich argues that this love and freedom created the possibility of its own corruption and distortion. He writes,

The opening of this new horizon is also accompanied by a second danger: institutionalization. There is a temptation to try to manage and, eventually, to legislate this new love, to create an institution that will guarantee it, insure it, and protect it by criminalizing its opposite. [...] This power is claimed first by the Church and later by the many secular institutions stamped from its mould. Wherever I look for the roots of modernity, I find

¹² Illich, *The Rivers North of the Future*, 47.

¹³ *Ibid*, 47.

them in the attempts of the churches to institutionalize, legitimate, and manage Christian vocation.¹⁴

In other words, the crisis of modernity stems from a certain secularization of an already corrupted Christianity that Illich names “Christendom”.¹⁵

In 1993, Illich gave a short address in which he acknowledged his gratitude to “Master Jacques” to whom he writes, “I owe an orientation which has decisively affected my pilgrimage for forty years.”¹⁶ It was from the social and theological writings of Ellul that Illich derived his fundamental insight linking modernity—specifically *technique*—to the subversion of Christianity.¹⁷ I would suggest that

Ellul’s biblical theology, and the embryonic concepts beginning to take shape in these seminars, provides a critically important window into Illich’s mature writings.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid, 47-48.

¹⁵ The significance of Illich’s historical thesis locating the origins of modernity in the corruption of Christianity has recently found concrete expression in Charles Taylor’s landmark and celebrated study *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 737-744. Taylor takes very seriously the implications of Illich’s work for our ability to adequately describe the nature of secularization and the development of western society. For an earlier assessment of Illich’s life and writings, see also Taylor’s “Forward” to *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2005), ix-xiv. For a more developed critique of “Christendom” in Ellul, see *The New Demons*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: Seabury, 1975), 1-17; and *The Subversion of Christianity*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

¹⁶ Illich, “An Address to ‘Master Jacques,’” 65.

¹⁷ Ibid, 67. “During ten good years after my meeting with Professor Ellul, I concentrated my study principally on that which *la technique* does: What it does to the environment, to social structures, to cultures, to religions. I have also studied the symbolic character or, if you prefer, the ‘perverse sacramentality’ of institutions purveying education, transport, housing, health care and employment. I have no regrets. The social consequences of domination by *la technique*, making institutions counterproductive, must be understood if one wishes to measure the effects on the specific *hexis* (state) and *praxis* defining the experience of modernity today. It is necessary to face the horrors, in spite of certain knowledge that seeing is beyond the power of our senses. I have successively analyzed the hidden functions of highly accelerated transport, communication channels, prolonged educational treatment, and human garaging. I have been astounded by their symbolic power. That has given me empirical proof that the Ellulian category of *la technique*, which I had originally employed as an analytic tool, also defines a reality engendered by the pursuit of an ‘ideology of Christian derivation’.”

¹⁸ See Lee Hoinacki, “The Trajectory of Ivan Illich,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society* 23, no. 5 (2003), 382-389.

Though rough around the edges, *Freedom, Love, and Power* is surely an important text. Not only does it add depth and nuance to Ellul's approach to the challenges of sustaining authentic faith in a modern technocratic world, but it also illuminates many of the fundamental questions provoked by a fresh encounter with Jewish and Christian Scripture. As Vanderburg observes, "the work of Jacques Ellul, seen as a dialogue between his 'social and historical' and his 'biblical' studies, reunites the 'vertical' and the 'horizontal' dimensions of the revelation. In this way, it could restore the Christian community to its task of being a transformative presence in the world, likened to salt in food or yeast in bread dough."¹⁹ Equally, those interested in exploring the foundations of Illich's religious thought would find no better place to begin than "Master Jacques."

Author's Bio

Ben Kautzer is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Theology and Religion and an administrative assistant at the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University. His current research explores the integral relationship between ethics, liturgy, and political praxis in contemporary Christian theology. More specifically, his work seeks to recover alternative approaches to questions of justice and mercy, charity and solidarity beyond the subjugating cross-pressures of individualistic philanthropy and bureaucratic social welfarism.

¹⁹ Vanderburg, "Introduction," xix.