

## The Sense of Incarnation in Ellul and Charbonneau

by Daniel Cérézuelle

**Abstract:** Bernard Charbonneau, a friend and an acknowledged inspiration of the Christian Jacques Ellul, was an agnostic, but they shared some fundamental values. Their understanding of freedom as incarnation was the common ground of their lifelong companionship in the criticism of technological society and in environmental activism.

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In this essay I shall try to clarify the common existential and spiritual background of Ellul's and Charbonneau's critique of technological society. They met very young, became friends in their twenties, and their intellectual companionship lasted throughout their life. Ellul, as most of you already know, kept saying that he had an important intellectual debt towards Charbonneau. Although he was not a Christian, I think it is useful to take into account Charbonneau's thought, because it sheds some light on the orientations of Ellul's thought. The agnostic Charbonneau and the Christian Ellul had in common a same understanding of human freedom as incarnation. Ellul wrote for example that already in the 1930s they "insisted on the unity of the human being, on the incarnation, on one's commitment according to a personal decision."<sup>1</sup> Their common dissent with the evolution of modern society is rooted in this common spiritual experience. When they were young they had long discussions on this issue and understanding what one says about this issue helps understand what the other has to say.

On this fundamental issue of freedom as incarnation, the social writings of Ellul say very little. True, we can get some hints from his theological writings. But those hints are not always very explicit. For example in *Presence of the kingdom* he makes a connection between the issue of incarnation and the criticism of modern technology and of the modern State, but this connection is not very explicit. I shall try here to make it more explicit and in order to do so, I must begin with a few remarks on the Judeo- Christian roots of incarnation.

### I. Two Models of Perfection.

**Free like a bird:** In most religions, perfection or sanctity can be achieved through a process of disincarnation: achieving immortality, getting rid of the individual body and its carnal needs, liberating the soul from gravity, flying, and so forth. Most mysticism aims at liberating the self from its condition captive to a living body. This self-deification by means of disincarnation is also the goal of many speculative philosophies. Thanks to the power of the concept, man's mind can liberate him from his finitude, which he experiences in his body. (The *soma = sema* theme of the ancient Gnostics exemplifies this trend). This longing for the post-human, or the trans-human, is also one of the powerful motives of the technological adventure.

Reaching a perfect state, obtaining freedom, is overcoming the bonds which attach the human mind to the laws of corporeal nature. Hence, the importance of ascensional symbolisms and of transparency in representations of human perfection.

This state of mind may encourage a fascination with technological power and an interpretation of all growth of human power over nature as one more step toward the ultimate liberation of the human mind from the constraints of a corporeal mode of existence which is experienced as an obstacle.

**On earth as in heaven:** Judeo-Christian revelation breaks with this aspiration towards a disincarnate perfection. To mankind obsessed with the desire for escape from its condition (“you will be like gods...”), the God of the Bible gives the example of an unheard of and scandalous perfection by means of his incarnation in the world. “The word (or ‘verb’) became flesh” says the Bible.

This *ensarkosis logou*, incarnation of the word, lends itself to various interpretations. A sacrificial one would say that the sufferings which Jesus endured in his flesh are the price for the salvation of mankind. Another one would say that this incarnation does not amount to a diminishing of God but to the manifestation of a supreme perfection. Becoming sentient flesh, individual incarnated existence, active in space and time, the verb incarnate gives mankind the model of a *perfection in this world*. Before Christ, humans could believe that perfection, which realizes all the aspirations of the spirit, could exist only *beyond the natural world*. Now, Jesus, as God-made-human, gives the example of the full realization of the spirit in this world.

The example of Christ tells us that sanctity is no longer to be found in a flight from this world or in a rejection of our carnal condition, but in the act of incarnation. This is the new model for human freedom. And since this imperative of incarnation knows no limits, it is no longer during some special moments of their spiritual life that humans should realize this incarnation. From now on, invested with the “freedom of God’s children,” they must try to translate or put into practice their spiritual values in all the dimensions of their daily life, which thereby becomes sanctified. Therefore the value of human works should be evaluated and judged by taking into account the experience of all dimensions, including the carnal ones, of this daily life.

## II. Technique and Incarnation in Jacques Ellul.

In his *Presence of the Kingdom*, Ellul explains what should be a Christian ethics in a world dominated by technology. And right at the beginning of this book he raises the issue of incarnation: “God has been incarnated, and we should not disincarnate him.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, it is important for each believer not to separate his material (carnal) condition from his spiritual condition. Our responsibility is to incarnate our spiritual values in this world “from which we should escape.”<sup>3</sup> According to this imperative of incarnation, we should build “a civilization at human scale.” But our technological civilization is not adapted to “carnal man” (*l’homme de chair*).

The accelerated growth of our technical, economic, and scientific means is grounded in a process of abstraction which neglects real man and considers only an ideal man. “Thus, living and real man is subordinated to the means which should guarantee the happiness of an abstract man. The man of philosophers and politicians, which does not exist, is the only goal of this prodigious adventure which results in the misery of the man of flesh and blood, and transforms it everywhere into a means.”<sup>4</sup> If we seriously pay attention to the real condition of the man of flesh, we should not accept this dissociation. The incarnation of the verb in Christ gives mankind a model: in order to be good, an action must incorporate its end not only in its effects but also in the agent and the means he uses.

An efficient action realized by someone who does not know what he does and why, who is reduced to the status of mere irresponsible means, cannot be good. “What is important is not our tools and institutions, but ourselves.”<sup>5</sup> Only a process of disincarnation can allow us to imagine that an action could be justified by its end. All our actions, and all their effects should embody our values. Others have held similar ideas but what is original with Ellul is his willingness (and ability) to take seriously and radically these principles for identifying and evaluating the instances of depersonalization of daily life. This is the basis for his criticism of modern state and of technical civilization. He shows us how the real workings of the technical and institutional equipment of mankind tend towards autonomy, which is contradictory with the principle of the unity of means and ends associated with incarnation.

Thus, the emphasis on incarnation in Christ as well as in the life of a real individual man, which is at the core of Christianity, requires us to submit our techniques and our institutions to an evaluation (*jugement*) which determines their place in our lives as well as their limits.

Ellul insists on *three consequences* of this imperative of incarnation:

First: this imperative of incarnation should be obeyed in all the dimensions of our lives. For example, concerning power relationships, we should pay attention not only to politically institutionalized forms of domination, but to non-political forms of domination. This requires that we pay a careful attention to the structures of daily life in order to identify hidden power relationships.

Second: personal autonomy is both the condition and the realization of freedom. Only through the responsible action of each one of us can the word of God incarnate itself in the world. Everyone, each of us, is called to act and to decide personally in a world which depersonalizes action. Everything which reduces our personal control on our daily life is bad.

Third: our spiritual and moral orientations must be put into action first in our daily life and express themselves through our way of life (*style de vie*). For changing the world, private life is as important as public and political action.

### **III. Freedom and Incarnation in Bernard Charbonneau**

Throughout his entire life, Charbonneau was motivated by the idea that industrial civilization cannot answer two basic human needs: the need for nature and the need for personal action, or -- said otherwise -- the need for freedom. Hence, his works can be read as an invitation to invent a new civilization which could respond to these needs for nature and freedom. Because incarnation is a central feature of the human condition, the incapacity of our civilization to respond to these needs results in the depersonalizing of existence. In one of his books he writes that “uncontrolled development threatens this man whose mind is incarnated in a body.”<sup>6</sup>

So why does Charbonneau think that incarnation is a central dimension of human existence? For him, to be free is to accept -- and not to reject -- the tension between a spiritual imperative and the difficulties to incarnate it in nature as well as in society. Only an individual can realize this incarnation in his life. “Between heaven and earth, between the ideal and the real, a mediator is necessary, and there is none for that, but a man; in order to achieve its incarnation, the spirit never used another device.”<sup>7</sup> Accordingly, the dream of a total freedom is meaningless, since freedom

cannot be a permanent mode of existing; it consists in an *effort for liberation* which succeeds more or less.

Charbonneau said again and again that a thought which is not put into practice in daily life is worthless, and – as a consequence – that every dimension of the individual’s experience is important, since every circumstance of daily life is an occasion for putting our values into practice.

Besides, Charbonneau is convinced that thought has a vital need of expressing itself through an action which gives it in return material reality and ontological weight. Since he is especially aware of the global completeness of the person, he is reluctant to give more importance to certain material dimensions of life than to others.

For example, in order to evaluate the productive equipment of a society, we should take into account not only the level of consumption but also the sensuous (or sensorial) conditions of daily life.

Whether we consider the progress of institutional organization or the progress of technological and industrial performance, beyond a certain threshold the growth of our tools may deprive all individuals of the possibility of incarnating their values through actual actions. Meditating about the fantastic increase of the power of mankind’s tools, and especially of the state, he says “From my own thinking to this reality, the distance is such that I am condemned to a disincarnated thought, when thinking the state can be animated by an all-powerful imperative of incarnation.”<sup>8</sup>

### **United by a Common Thought**

This is the title of an article which Charbonneau wrote for an environmentalist journal after Ellul’s death. Reflecting on their personalist youth and their split with the Esprit Movement of Emmanuel Mounier, Charbonneau wrote that, unlike Mounier, “we were not interested in saying ‘amen’ to progress, but in understanding the threat which it posed to nature and freedom . . . Where for Mounier it was necessary to adapt to a society in transformation, for us it was necessary to judge it according to our values of democracy and freedom in order to change it.”<sup>9</sup>

In the *personalist manifesto* written in 1937 by both Ellul and Charbonneau, they criticize the depersonalization of action which, in modern society, results from the normal working of administrative, economic, and technical institutions.<sup>10</sup> They call for an evaluation of institutions and technologies not from the point of view of efficiency but rather according to their consequences for each of our mastery of our own daily lives. What place remains in the technological society for our own decisions? For them the reduction of our control over our daily life is evil.

Reflecting on their early common commitments, Jacques Ellul wrote: “we felt the necessity of proclaiming certain values and of incarnating certain forces.” But “when the personal problem consisted in examining if we could incarnate the necessity which we felt inside of us,” in our normal social life, the question was no longer “to live according to one’s thinking” but simply “to think and nothing else and to make a living and nothing else.”<sup>11</sup>

Thus, it is their understanding of incarnation which led these two young thinkers to undertake a radical critique of a civilization which creates such a dramatic split between the spiritual and material dimensions of life.

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- <sup>1</sup> Jacques Ellul, « Introduction à la pensée de Bernard Charbonneau ,» in *Ouvertures, Cahiers du Sud-Ouest*, n° 7 (1985), p. 41.
- <sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Présence au monde moderne* (Genève: Roulet, 1948), p. 16.
- <sup>3</sup> *Présence*, p.19.
- <sup>4</sup> *Présence*, p.83.
- <sup>5</sup> *Présence*, p.105.
- <sup>6</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, *Le système et le chaos* (Paris : Economica, 1990), p.128.
- <sup>7</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, *Je Fus* (Bordeaux : Opales, 2000), p.21.
- <sup>8</sup> Charbonneau, *Je Fus*, p.10.
- <sup>9</sup> Bernard Charbonneau, « Unis par une pensée commune » in *Combat-Nature* n°107 (nov. 1994).
- <sup>10</sup> Bernard Charbonneau et Jacques Ellul, *Directives pour un manifeste personnaliste*. Journal intérieur des groupes personnalistes du Sud Ouest, 1935 ou 1936. Patrick Troude-Chastenet en a publié une édition annotée dans le *Revue française d'histoire des idées politiques*, n° 9 (Paris,1999). pp.159-177.
- <sup>11</sup> Jacques Ellul, « Introduction à la pensée de Bernard Charbonneau » p. 41.