

On the Lookout for the Unexpected: Ellul as Combative Contemplative

by Sue Fisher Wentworth

Abstract: In his analysis of *la technique*, Jacques Ellul brilliantly names what is going on in our world. His refusal to be prescriptive at the end of this analysis is well known; he does, however, urge his readers to create a new style of life. In the service of this creativity, this essay explores the character and contours of this life as he describes it: as the gift of the Holy; as rooted in prayer, the Spirit's own life within us, which calls for our absolute attentiveness; and as involving the willingness to wait in real darkness. It is a way of life offering an essential counterpoint to technological society's drive for autonomy and self-sufficiency, its absorption in frantic activity, and its demeaning alternatives of despair or false hope. It is also a way of life consonant with what the larger Christian tradition has long referred to as the "contemplative" way; the essay draws on this tradition to shed light on Ellul's thought, and explores the light he brings, as a modern man, Protestant, intellectual, and rabble rouser. Ellul invites us to be "on the lookout for the unexpected," open to the Wholly Other, for the end of human life is the mystery of presence: God's hidden presence ("I AM"), presence before God, presence in the world as leaven, salt, light.

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In his analysis of *la technique*, Jacques Ellul brilliantly names what is going on in our world. When we look to him for guidance on how to move forward, however, we are thwarted. As he says, "At the end of my books, readers are called to take action and make their own decisions, and they surely say to themselves, "This is very annoying. I don't see which action I can take." They would prefer a last chapter in which someone would tell them, "Here is what you must think and do." This last chapter I will never write." (*In Season, Out of Season*, 197)

For many, it is just this refusal to be prescriptive which discredits Ellul. Yet it is exactly here – at the border of what may be called Ellul's silence – that our real engagement may most fruitfully begin.¹ Ellul wants us to stand on Holy Ground, where real freedom and real change alone emerge. His silence is an invitation into Silence, into Real Presence. It is *presence* that is definitive, the "effectual, immediate presence of the Living One, of the Wholly Other, of the Transcendent (with all the reservations which those words call for when applied to the One whom nothing can define)" (*Prayer*, 148). *Presence* matters more than action or thought; it is the source of both.

Ellul *will* urge us to the creation of a new style of life, a new presence, a new way of being in the world. In his seminal book, *Présence au Monde Moderne* (which appeared in English as *The Presence of the Kingdom*), Ellul specifically addresses Christians who would act faithfully, lovingly, and hopefully in the

world: "In order that Christianity today may have a point of contact with the world, it is less important to have theories about economic and political questions, or even to take up a definite political and economic position, than it is to create a new style of life. . . . This problem of the style of life is absolutely central" (*Presence* 119-121). For "true action . . . is the testimony of a profound life. . . . What matters is to *live*, and not to act" (76).

The purpose of this paper is to attend to the contours and character of this profound life to which Ellul bears witness. As we shall see, it is a way of life that contrasts at every point with the way of life pressed upon us by technological society. First, this life is the gift of the Holy; it is a flowing life of exchange and generosity, the life of the Holy Spirit within, in a relationship which establishes selfhood and enables real freedom. Where technological civilization is founded on the drive to self-sufficiency, mastery, and control, this life emerges from the Wholly Other's refusal to be self-sufficient, self-contained, "in control."

Secondly, this life is rooted in prayer, but not prayer as we reflexively think of it. What is prayer for Ellul? What is it not? *This* prayer is powerful enough to be "the exact counterpoint of the rigorous mechanism of the technological society" (*Prayer* 174).

And finally, in a world captivated by a "will to death, a will to suicide," this life is capacious enough, trusting enough, to acknowledge, allow, and endure real darkness without veering off into any form of despair (*Presence*, 19). Only here can authentic Hope emerge.

Throughout this essay a theme is constant, that this way of life to which Ellul bears witness -- which is our primary concern -- is also what the larger Christian tradition has long referred to as the "contemplative" way. To make this association does not make this way manageable; it is not a way subject to domestication. It is illuminating to acknowledge, however, that it is an ancient way of the Body of Christ: the style of life we are creating, which remains ever new, has a long and rich history. What light does Ellul bring as a modern man, a Protestant, an intellectual, a rabble rouser? What light does the larger tradition itself shed on Ellul? Our culture, whether Christian culture or popular culture, has difficulties aplenty with the notion of "contemplation" -- misunderstandings, prejudices, resistances. As we shall see, Ellul shared in these. At the same time, we find him urging in *Autopsy of Revolution*, "If you would be genuinely revolutionary *in our society* . . . , be contemplative: that is the source of individual strength to break the system" (286).² He will not tell us what to think or do, but he will tell us what to *be*: "Be contemplative."

Ellul was not a "pious" man. He was not a "religious" man. He was a man willing to be before One Who Is, and he invites us to venture the same.

I.

"Ground of being, and granite of it; past all/ Grasp God"

-Gerard Manley Hopkins

It was August 1930, in Blanquefort, France, not far from Bordeaux. The young man, 18 years old, was on summer holiday, having just finished his secondary school exams. He was alone in a friend's house,

busy translating Faust. Some seventy years later Ellul reluctantly described to an interviewer what happened next: “. . . [S]uddenly, and I have not doubts on this at all, I knew myself to be In the presence of a something so astounding, so overwhelming that had entered me to the very center of my being. That’s all I can tell you. I was so moved that I left the room in a stunned state. In the courtyard there was a bicycle lying around. I jumped on it and fled. I have no idea whatsoever how many dozens of kilometers I must have covered. Afterwards I thought to myself: ‘You have been in the presence of God.’ And there you are” (Chastenet, 52).

Ellul refers to this event in another context and says that he doesn’t wish to relate it, except to mention the violence of the encounter, and his response: he “realized that God had spoken,” but because he didn’t want God to have him, like Jonah, and multiple individuals before and since, he fled (*In Season* 14). This dramatic experience was for Ellul the self-revelation of the Holy -- totally unexpected, completely unsought, utterly commanding. It was encounter with the Wholly Other. Ellul’s reticence in speaking about this personal experience is fitting, a testimony to its authenticity. We stand at the border of Silence.

As Karth Barth frequently said, “God acts first.” This “acting first” – whether it is experienced suddenly, dramatically, and violently, as with Ellul at his initial conversion, and/or over a lifetime of divine faithfulness – is the gift of the Holy. This is the Revelation: this incomprehensible Reality we call “God” wants to pour God’s own life into us, not simply to command us to live in a certain way. The life to which we are called, we are given. Our life is I-Thou life, and we are not the “I” in the relation. This encounter with Holiness is a “wild adventure”; it cannot be secured beforehand or possessed after, but only received (*Presence* 109).

Life, for Ellul, begins here for each one of us, with God’s self-gift. It is not as if we are alive first, and then meet God, or not. Life is located *here*, in this very meeting, whether we are aware of it or not. We are because God is. Human aliveness is not mere physical aliveness, a beating heart and the fact of respiration; it is not identified with physical health or youth or beauty. Being alive is “above all a fact of spiritual life” (Ibid. 76). **“To be alive means the total situation of man as he is confronted by God. . .”** (Ibid., my emphasis). It is “presence,” “*pre*” + “*esse*,” literally “being before,” “being in front of”: it is “being found” and living together with God in vital relation, being God-breathed.

This I-Thou relationality turns our normal self-centered, self-generated world upside down and inside out. In the work of God, as Ellul observes, the end and the means are “identical”: the work of God manifests “a unity of end and means” (Ibid. 64-5). Jesus brought the Kingdom by *being* the presence of the Kingdom. According to Ellul, the “first consequence” of this identity for us is this: “that what actually matters, in practice, is ‘to be’ and not ‘to act’” (PK 74).³ It is for us

. . . to manifest the gift which has been given us, the gift of grace and of peace, of love and of the Holy Spirit: that is the very end pursued by God and miraculously present within us. Henceforth our human idea of means is absolutely overturned; its root of pride and of power has been cut away. The means is no longer called to ‘achieve’ anything. It is delivered from its uncertainty about the way to follow, and the success to be expected. . . . **[W]e must learn that it is not our possibilities which control our action, but it is God’s end, present within us”** (67, my emphasis).

For Ellul, this creative Life, the Holy Spirit, “can transform our intelligence, in such a way that it will not be swallowed up by our systems, and that it will be sufficiently penetrating” (*Presence* 103). The Spirit “alone can give meaning, truth, and effectiveness to language” (Ibid.) It “alone can establish the link with one’s neighbor” (Ibid. 106). It is the mystery of this divine life, alive in the person, that gives human work “its meaning, its value, its effectiveness, its weight, its truth, its justice – its life . . .” (Ibid. 97).

God acts first, always and everywhere. It is striking, in this context, to hear Jesus’ words to his disciples in the Gospel of John:

Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5).

As one commentator observes, “[T]he parable of the True Vine is, above all, a contemplative parable. . . . The verb *remain* is a verb of *being* It is used twice as many times as the verb *bear fruit*” (Cavalletti, 54). The same “sap,” the same life, flows through the whole plant. This was the pattern and essence of Jesus’ own relation with the one he called “Father”: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works” (John 14: 10).

We hear echoes from the larger Christian contemplative tradition. “God is the center of my soul,” writes St. John of the Cross. Jean Pierre de Caussade says, “Divine activity floods the universe; it penetrates all creatures; it flows over them. Wherever they are, it is there; it precedes, accompanies and follows them. We have only to allow ourselves to be carried forward on the crest of its waves” (quoted in Squire, 217). Thomas Kelly, a more recent witness, writes in *A Testament of Devotion*:

Deep within us all there is an amazing inner sanctuary of the soul, a holy place, a Divine Center, a speaking Voice, to which we may continuously return. Eternity is at our hearts, pressing upon our time-torn lives, warming us with intimations of an astounding destiny, calling us home unto Itself. . . . It is a dynamic center, a creative Life that presses to birth within us. Here is the slumbering Christ, stirring to be awakened, to become the soul we clothe in earthly form and action. And He is within us all. (3).

The new style of life to which Ellul calls us originates in a Life deeper than our powers of self-determination. It flows from the Creator Spirit; it is the gift of the Holy, capable of enlivening dust and resurrecting the dead.

II.

**“True love and prayer are learned in the moment when prayer has become impossible
and the heart has turned to stone.”**

- Thomas Merton

What is our relation to this Gift? We can affirm it; we can reject it. We can, like Ellul for a decade, flee from it, refuse it. In any case, we must decide. If we assent to the Gift, what then? For Ellul, the fruit of

the Spirit's presence is *prayer*. This is a second dimension of the new style of life which Ellul sees must be discovered. "Prayer comes before all the rest in the life in Christ" (*Prayer* 116). It is "the sole necessary and sufficient action and practice, in a society that has lost its way" (Ibid. 175). The church "can only have recourse to God in prayer. . ." (*Presence* 126). "It is, above all, in prayer and meditation that intellectuals will rediscover the sources of an intelligent life rooted in the concrete" (Ibid. 112). "Prayer is the power which exorcises demons, by the Holy Spirit, and is thus the weapon of faith" (Ibid. 16). In the battle against "death and nothingness," it is "the eschatological act of prayer" which enables us "to pick up once again the thread of life" (*Prayer*, 178). "The act of prayer . . . resolves both the problematics of faith and all the impossibilities of human hope" (*Hope* 274).

This "prayer," however, is not what we reflexively assume. For Ellul, true prayer is not only neglected in the church today; it is indeed impossible: *L'impossible Prière* is the title of the French original of the English *Prayer and Modern Man*. Impossible from without, for us as modern people, for whom there is no spiritual dimension, nor is there time or space, but only distraction, being pulled from one thing to another – and impossible from within, for Christians in Christendom, who labor under "a whole set of misunderstandings, of obsolete images, of spurious identifications, [which] rob prayer of all further justification and being, except as a counterfeit" (*Prayer* 64). "It is prayer which should be decisive, but we no longer have any confidence in the extraordinary power of prayer" (*Presence* 16). And then, bluntly, "for man in our society prayer cannot be what it is" (*Prayer* 64).

What does Ellul mean by prayer? We can begin with what he doesn't mean, since the substitutes are legion. We come to prayer with hands bearing "offerings, presents, vows, good deeds," instead of our lives and ourselves (Ibid. 6-7). We want to deal with "the pleasant, the consoling, the sweet, the banal, the ordinary" in our prayer, instead of actually encountering God (Ibid. 8).⁴ We approach prayer as a duty; our prayers are rote, or simply emotive. We pray, "Thy will be done" to disown the reality of our own will, not to seek alignment of that very real will with God's. Prayer for us is deformed by a false posture of servility and a false affect of piety.

Most fundamentally, Ellul argues that we labor under the false notion -- one "undisputed, widespread, and habitual in all the churches" -- that prayer consists of us talking to God, that it is a discourse, "a sort of pious language addressed to God" (Ibid. 63). If we think of what happens when someone says, "Let us pray," we see the truth in this: most of us bow our heads, close our eyes, and expect someone to start talking. Generally when we speak of prayer we assume that we will be the ones starting the conversation; that it will consist of words (we "say" our prayers), and that we will be the ones using them; that God is a long way off and must be hailed.

What is true prayer? True prayer is also "impossible," albeit in a more salutary sense of being outside the realm of the merely humanly possible. True prayer, for Ellul, is a gift of the Holy Spirit. It is a "profound reality," "an "extraordinary explosive force," "outrageous, astonishing," a "miracle" (*Prayer*, 63, *Presence* 77, *Prayer* 26, 9). In this prayer God teaches us God's way, a way "truly impossible to find unless God reveals it, truly impossible to follow with our human power alone" (*Presence* 126). This prayer is first of all the prayer of Christ, the prayer of the Holy Spirit. *That* prayer is *our* life. It is wholly gift: "We are forced to the conclusion that prayer is a gift from God, and its reality depends upon him alone" (*Prayer* 62). This gift establishes relationship, IS relationship with God. It is "living with God," a

“form of life, the life with God”; it is “the life which I receive from him, and which unfolds in a story with Him” (49, 60, 61). It is “real encounter with God”; it “rests on the lived and living contact with the Lord” (Ibid. 119, 100-101). “In prayer God invites us to live with him,” as Karl Barth says and Ellul references (Ibid. 48). What matters is life with God.

Here again we note the resonance with the Christian contemplative tradition. As Thomas Merton says, “In prayer we discover what we already have. . . . Everything has been given to us in Christ. All we need is to experience what we already possess. . . . Let Jesus pray. Thank God Jesus is praying. Forget yourself. Enter into the prayer of Jesus. Let him pray in you” (quoted in Pennington, 49-50). Dom John Main O.S.B. writes, “in the light of Christ, prayer is not talking-to but being-with” (*Essential Writings*, 67). “We are praying when we are awakening to the presence of the Spirit in our heart. If this is so, there can be no forms or methods of prayer. There is one prayer, the stream of love between the Spirit of the risen Christ and his Father, in which we are incorporated” (Ibid. 88). Brother Roger of Taizé says, “. . . [I]n the depths of our being Christ is praying, far more than we imagine. Compared to the immensity of that hidden prayer of Christ in us, our explicit praying dwindles to almost nothing. That is why silence is so essential in discovering the heart of prayer” (*Songs and Prayers from Taizé*, 17).

We do not know how to pray, but the Spirit does, interceding “with inexpressible groanings” (Romans 8:26b).⁵ Our inability is the opening into the power of God. Prayer is never originally “ours.” The content of prayer is given by God, in an encounter “which transcends all language,” “an encounter between the living God and the living person” which “overflow[s]” into human speech as its “secondary expression” (*Prayer*, 60). Prayer does not begin with us; in prayer we are addressed by God. Ellul quotes Kierkegaard at length here:

The immediate person thinks and imagines that when he prays, the important thing, the thing he must concentrate upon, is that *God should hear* what HE *is praying for*. And yet in the true, eternal sense it is just the reverse: the true relation in prayer is not when God hears what is prayed for, but when *the person praying* continues to pray until he is *the one who hears*, who hears what God wills. The immediate person, therefore, uses many words and, therefore, makes demands in his prayer; the true man of prayer only *attends* (Ibid. 111).

This prayer is the presence of God, of God with us, “the only vital miracle” (*Jonah* 64). It frees us from a locked-up world. It is this presence, this being with, which Jonah finally understood, according to Ellul, in the belly of the whale. It is God’s “staying with man in death and hell (all forms of hell, including those we know on earth),” this fullness of love, which is the very heart of prayer (Ibid. 65).

As Ellul says, “So when prayer seems impossible that is no reason for panic or despair, for making a great effort, for attempting devices or techniques, for awaiting some mysterious and sovereign urge. It is enough to fall back on the most simple and childlike obedience asked of us, that of hearing the word” (*Prayer* 110-111). This is obedience (*obedire*), hearing (*audire*) --- “a pure obedience without an end in sight” (*Hope* 274). It is for us to become hearers, to allow our deepest selves to become listening selves. We must renounce “human means,” renounce “the possibilities of my own strength and initiative,” renounce the use of power (*Prayer* 30, 6). Prayer for us is “a stripping bare, the abandonment of all human apparatus in order to place myself, without arms or equipment, into the hands of the Lord, who decides and fulfills” (Ibid. 30). We renounce thinking that we either must or even can act first.

Hearing the word, we both get out of the way and become able to respond. This primal attentiveness, I would suggest, is what Ellul means when he writes, in *Autopsy of Revolution*, that we are to “be contemplative.” Here is the pertinent text in its entirety:

It would represent a vital breach in the technological society, a truly revolutionary attitude, if contemplation could replace frantic activity. Contemplation fills the void of our society of lonely men. ‘The art of contemplation produces objects that it regards as signs instead of things – signs leading to the discovery of a different reality I write to discover,’ Octavio Paz says, ‘because contemplation is the art of discovering things that science and technology cannot reveal. Contemplation restores to man the spiritual breadth of which technology divests him, to objects their significance, and to work its functional presence. Contemplation is the key to individual survival today; an attitude of profound contemplation allows actions to redeem their significance and to be guided by something other than systems and objects.’ That is the way man can recover himself *today*. If you would be genuinely revolutionary *in our society* (I repeat that I am not disclosing a permanent value or an eternal truth), be contemplative: that is the source of individual strength to break the system (285-6).

Fullness of presence, instead of “frantic activity”; depth and communion, instead of loneliness; signs instead of things; the discovery of spiritual breadth instead of the mere mapping of materiality; profundity; otherness. Contemplation involves openness to a depth dimension, a quieting, stopping, attending to, wondering at – everything technical civilization finds threatening and wishes to distract and hurry us away from. The contemplative makes space and takes time. Time and space -- the very media which technological civilization seeks to annihilate -- are the human media, after all.

Yet as many misunderstandings cluster around the word “contemplation” as around the word “prayer,” as evidenced in Ellul’s own treatment in *Prayer and Modern Man*. Early in that book he urges the reader interested in a theology of prayer to have recourse to “Augustine or Teresa of Avila, to Luther or Pascal, to John of the Cross or to Barth, to Kierkegaard or to Calvin,” many of whom are classically considered “contemplatives” (vii). Yet when he treats of “the experience of the great mystics” he speaks in the voice of a modern man (himself) who associates “mysticism” with extraordinary experiences, speaking in tongues, “a knowledge of inexpressible awarenesses, presences, truths,” comparing these to what “the youth of today seek in drugs” (9-10). This is “encounter with God” which is “fusion with the great All,” “the way of the dark night of the soul of John of the Cross, or of the ineffable presence disclosed to Teresa of Avila” (10). And he says, “But in the meeting with God, or in the fusion, there no longer is any prayer properly so called, since nothing in the realm of knowledge or cogency can any longer be said,” a “tendency [that] is very foreign to the Protestant mentality, which is always more or less rational” (Ibid.) Later he refers to “the prayer of the mystics, the plunge into the vast silence, into the ineffable, into the incommunicable” (97). Clearly these are a source of discomfort.

He continues: “The mystic experience frightens us. We feel embarrassed to recognize it. We distrust it.” “And yet,” he says,

If prayer is indeed a speaking with God face to face, how could we remain the forlorn inmates of the commonplace? Why does not this presence of God work a transformation within us? I am not saying, of course, that the mystical experience is the test

of a truly profound prayer, but rather, that our prayer, which assuredly never takes us that far, is the test of an absence of prayer! (10)

He then rejects St. John of Damascus' description of prayer as a lifting of the mind to God, saying this transgresses what only God can accomplish, and he "dispose[s] of the mystical experience of prayer." But the disposal is not complete, for he concludes with this simple and touching observation: "*Perhaps* in that case we are missing a profound truth" (11). He had signaled his ambivalence from the beginning: "Confusedly, but movingly, the experience of the great mystics still attracts us" (9).

This combination of confusion and attraction is something we moderns know well. "Mysticism" seems strange, otherworldly, and "contemplation," rarefied, meant only for special people, "reserved for a small class of almost unnatural beings and prohibited to everyone else" (Merton 7). It suggests withdrawal, removal from the "real world," and is easy to dismiss as deluded or simply irrelevant. Perhaps we agree with Ellul when he flatly writes, "[T]he present-day world is not meant for contemplation," although he also acknowledges that insofar as that assumes silence, peace, and tranquility, neither was the Middle Ages (*Prayer* 171)! At the same time he expresses deep regret that "[t]he intelligence of modern man is no longer nourished at the source of contemplation, of awareness of reality. . ." (*Presence* 92).

Ellul makes a significant contribution here with his refusal to allow contemplation to fade into "tranquility," simply a state of being unruffled – a state which the larger tradition has also registered, and dismissed, as "pernicious peace," "lethal sleep," "holy floating" (Main, 88). No one can mistake Ellul for a proponent of escapism. The contemplative life is at once attentive to the depths and alert, energized, *combative*. Ellul surveys the battlefield and delineates where the battle is joined: combat against the self, against "religion," against falsehood, against evil, with God, against death and nothingness. "Je combattrai, je combattrai . . ." (*Silences* 15). It is disciplined, not dissipated. The revolution which is served by contemplation needs "every spark of defiance and self-assertion we can muster" (*Autopsy*, 300).

Ellul reminds us that "being contemplative" is dialectical, dynamic, vital. It is at once impossible and essential. It involves us fundamentally with "a presence. . . whose margins are our margins; that calls us out over our own fathoms" (R. S. Thomas, quoted in Laird, 6).

III

"Wait without hope, for you are not ready for hope. . ."

- T. S. Eliot

Being called out over our own fathoms can be terrifying. And when it is not terrifying, it is radically challenging in other ways to a self, an ego, accustomed to the "stability" of being its own center. In this context, Ellul urges us to "l'espérance oubliée," hope that is forgotten: the willingness to wait in real darkness, the willingness to stay present to the felt absence of God. Just as the Holy One acts first to love the world, forever liberating us from our projections of "God"; just as the Spirit comes to the aid of our weakness in prayer, enfolding us into the Divine Life; so we do not "possess" that for which we hope. "Now hope that sees for itself is not hope. For who hopes for what one sees? But if we hope for what we

do not see, we wait with endurance” (Romans 8: 24-25).

Ellul sees “waiting” joined with “prayer” and “realism” in realizing the “effective fundamental attitude” (*Hope*, 258). This “waiting” is active, completely engaging, a decision made again and again; the “person of waiting” -- “stubborn, firm, unassuming” -- “rushes into the dark of God’s silence and of the abandonment” (Hope 261). This waiting is her or his “field of battle”; it is totally focused on “the moment when all will have become possible again” (Ibid.). Here again we see two decisive energies of prayer -- renunciation and combat – at work. The person of faith perseveres, remaining steadfast and constant in the face of absence, failure, contradiction, dullness, boredom. The renunciation of human means, referenced above, extends to a renunciation of attachment to experience. “We must not build on what happens to us personally” – whether positive or negative, consoling or depressing:

“We can indeed regard certain things in our lives as signs, miracles, God’s particular and personal action on us. But we are then to move on to what is signified by them. We must not cling to the sign itself, even though it be the most beautiful mystical experience [!]. We must leave behind what belongs to the past. . . . [I]t is God who counts and not our experiences” (*Jonah* 85).

We must “leave [our] subjectivity“ and “find [our] true and total center in the permanence and faithfulness of the love of God” (Ibid. 86).

Here again Ellul and the larger contemplative tradition shed light on each other, particularly in their shared witness to the spiritual reality of darkness. What Ellul calls “abandonment” others perhaps more trenchantly call “dark night,” “desolation,” “impasse.” Constance Fitzgerald, a Carmelite sister and student of St. John of the Cross, describes “impasse” as the experience of no way out, of no escape; the person is immured in “disappointment, disenchantment, hopelessness, and loss of meaning” (“Impasse,” 94). Thomas Merton speaks of “a terrible interior revolution”:

Gone is the sweetness of prayer. Meditation becomes impossible, even hateful. Liturgical functions seem to be an insupportable burden. The mind cannot think. The will seems unable to love. The interior life is filled with darkness and dryness and pain. The soul is tempted to think that all is over and that, in punishment for its infidelities, all spiritual life has come to an end” (42).

What is needed now is endurance, perseverance, “revolutionary patience” (Soelle, quoted by Fitzgerald, “Impasse,” 114). Only as this experience is faced, acknowledged, allowed, and mourned -- “if the ego does not demand understanding in the name of control and predictability but is willing to admit the mystery of its own being and surrender itself to this mystery” – can the soul emerge into the wholeness which God alone can give (Ibid. 96-97). It is only out of this suffering, this dying, that authentic, God-given hope can emerge.

The soul one day begins to realize, in a manner completely unexpected and surprising, that in this darkness it has found the living God. It is overwhelmed with the sense that He is there and that His love is surrounding and absorbing it on all sides. At that instant, there is no other important reality but God, infinite Love. Nothing else matters. The darkness remains as dark as ever and yet, somehow, it seems to have become brighter than the brightest day. The soul has entered a new world (Merton, 52-3)

Ellul refers to a time in his own life of a “severe trial in which everything was once again called into question,” which “involved not only my deepest personal attachments, and the significance of whatever I might undertake to do, but also that which constituted the very center of my person, or at least which I believe constitutes the center of my person All was called into question. . . .” (*Hope* v). It was only after this experience of the loss of everything that hope was born; before that, although he had written about hope, he “didn’t know what he was saying” (*Ibid.* vi).

This awareness of the reality of the dark night and the hope which can emerge, “in a manner completely unexpected and surprising,” is essential encouragement in our own dark night, whether experienced personally or societally. As Fitzgerald suggests, it would perhaps be helpful to understand our own time as a time of genuine impasse, instead of seeing the only alternatives as the denial of darkness or the succumbing to it. “We are citizens of a dominant nation, and I think that as a nation we have come to an experience of deep impasse and profound limitation. On the other side of all our technology, we have come to poverty and to dark night. We can find no escape from the world we have built . . .” (“Impasse,” 105). It is just this impasse which must be brought to prayer. The larger contemplative tradition, with Ellul, bears witness to the radical new life which can emerge, unexpectedly, miraculously, from out of this darkness, for those “willing to be stretched beyond [them]selves toward a new epiphany of the Holy, incomprehensible Mystery” (Fitzgerald, “From Impasse to Prophetic Hope,” 42).

IV.

Life with God is not complicated. A child can do it. It is we adults, in a technological society, who have become overburdened with our own capabilities, our own need for validation, our own powers. But the Holy knows no self-sufficiency, and will not leave us to ours. We find we have been given everything, and have nothing to hold on to; we are “out over 20,000 fathoms” (Kierkegaard). Art McGill calls it “receiving without having,” “an open poverty that is always waiting to receive” (61, 56). Ellul describes it as “bewilderment”:

In the powerful presence of the Holy Spirit we receive the answer to this work of God, and we are bewildered because we are no longer very sure about the way forward, which no longer depends upon us. The end, as well as the means, has been taken away from us, and we hesitate as we look at this way which lies open before us, whose end we cannot see: we have only one certainty, and that is the promise which has been made to us of a certain order, which God guarantees: ‘Seek ye first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all things shall be added unto you’ (Matt. 6:33). (*Presence* 78)

Here is the “breach which cannot be closed, [the] ‘undermining’ which cannot be avoided” (97), the “rupture.” We do not “have” faith, in the sense of yet one more possession. We lean, instead, into a radicality of trust, of interior poverty, of being dispossessed. We – the I-Thou – slowly and convulsively discover what it means to *live*.

Ellul is a modern man, post-religious, post-Christian, bearing witness to the Gift of the Holy. He is a Protestant, standing firm with the largely Catholic contemplative tradition to protest any attempt to encompass and “unify” this Gift which can only unify us. He is an intellectual committed to questioning the prevailing assumptions about the meaning and end of human life and the meaning of human activity.

He is a rabble rouser riveted by the depths of Silence. To “be contemplative” is not to be serene and unruffled, but to be engaged, attentive to the depths, willing to wait. Each of us, with the community, must discover the “how” of this life, as the Holy lays hold of us in our practical situation (*Presence*, 115).

This way of life to which Ellul bears witness offers an essential counterpoint to the way of the world. Instead of the autonomy and self-sufficiency of technical man, bent on the control of the material world, it bears witness to the mystery of a living relationship between a loving God and a beloved creation. Instead of noise, distraction, hurry, multi-tasking – the drive to fill every space -- it bears witness to the primacy of listening, of attentiveness. Instead of glittering despair, it chooses trust in the darkness. Ellul invites us to be open to the Wholly Other, for the end of human life is the mystery of presence: God's hidden presence ("I AM"), presence before God, presence in the world as leaven, salt, light.

The time is ripe for the renewal and rediscovery of contemplative prayer, this presence, this hearing of the word for which we are made. It is ripe personally, communally, ecumenically. We are gifted with an incredibly rich tradition of witness to the power and presence of the Spirit. Let us learn from it.

The time is ripe among faith traditions. Christians are not alone in being encountered by God. There are genuinely contemplative dimensions in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and other faith traditions. What can we learn from each other? In the being of prayer we become able to rediscover the other, to make space for the reality of the other. How can life with God be anything other than a school of humility? Those who genuinely bear witness to God are not self-righteous or self-justifying. We learn from Jonah that “the man chosen by God is far from having plumbed the full depths of God’s mysteries. . . . The man filled with the Holy Spirit knows only a small part of the mysteries and even of the action of God. The adventure of Jonah inclines us at every point to humility” (*Jonah*, 84).

When we read Ellul, unexpectedly, we find a contemplative, who invites us to a present life hidden with God, and enlivens and deepens our sense of what that might mean in today’s world. This way of life is “on the lookout for the unexpected,” much as Ellul and his childhood friend Pierre Farbos were as they roamed the quays of Bordeaux, willing to trust that Life is already there, about to unfold (Ellul and Chastenet, 45). It is a way of life rooted in absolute attention to the Mystery of God. “[T]he person who retires to his room to pray is the true radical. Everything will flow from that” (Ibid. 174).

¹ Silence is not something usually associated with Ellul, a prodigiously productive writer and an ardent conversationalist. It is worth noting, however, that his poetry, in which he was conscious of having “bared his soul,” as he said, and which he gave permission to publish only a few months before his death, was published in a little volume called *Silences*.

² My thanks to Arthur Boers for first calling my attention to this text.

³ We “do not have to strive and struggle in order that righteousness may reign upon the earth. We have to be ‘just’ or ‘righteous’ ourselves, bearers of righteousness Likewise we have not to force ourselves,

with great effort and intelligence, to bring peace upon the earth – we have ourselves to *be* peaceful” (Ibid. 66-76).

⁴As Thomas Merton says, in what could be a mini-version of *Prayer and Modern Man*: . . . [C]ontemplation will not be given to those who willfully remain at a distance from God, who confine their interior life to a few routine exercises of piety and a few external acts of worship and service performed as a matter of duty. Such people are careful to avoid sin. They respect God as a Master. But their heart does not belong to him. They are not really interested in Him, except in order to insure themselves against losing heaven and going to hell. In actual practice, their minds and hearts are taken up with their own ambitions and troubles and comforts and pleasures and all their worldly interests and anxieties and fears. God is only invited to enter this charmed circle to smooth out difficulties and to dispense rewards. (12)

⁵It was in reading Romans 8 that Ellul experienced what he called his “second conversion” (*In Season*, 15).

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