

Jacques Ellul: L'espérance d'abord

by Stéphane Lavignotte

Lyon: Editions Olivétan, 2012. 105 pp. pb. www.editions-olivetan.com

Reviewed by David W. Gill

David Gill is Professor of Workplace Theology & Business Ethics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston MA.

Stéphane Lavignotte is pastor of Maison Verte, a Reformed Church of France congregation in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. Before becoming a pastor Vignotte was a journalist on radio, television, and in print. He has been especially concerned and active in caring for the environment and assisting undocumented folk in Paris. This little volume subtitled “First of all, hope!” is not available in English --- but just maybe it should and will be some day. It is part of a series of books “Figures protestantes” which includes Bonhoeffer, Calvin, Luther, Zinzendorf . . . pretty famous company!

Lavignotte locates Ellul’s work in its historical, biographical, ecclesiastical, and social/cultural context. He does a good job distilling down Ellul’s thought into chapters on Technique/technology, Money/mammon, Propaganda/information, Hope/contradiction, and Ethics/life-style. Lavignotte probes and interacts with about twenty of Ellul’s books and several articles and some important secondary sources by Jean-Luc Porquet and Patrick Chastenet. I did wish for some reference to Ellul’s work on politics and his important books on the *Humiliation of the Word* and *The Ethics of Freedom* but otherwise this is a very nice introduction within the 100 page space limitation.

Lavignotte is deeply appreciative of Ellul’s thought and sees him as a prophet and an iconoclast, challenging us to dethrone all idols and break with the closure of this technological world. What I also valued from Lavignotte was his refusal to elevate Ellul to untouchable sainthood but rather to question and disagree where he felt it necessary. Two examples of this were homosexuality and Islam. Lavignotte scolds Ellul for some rash comments about AIDS as the penalty for an obsession with sex by gays. So too, Ellul suggested the expulsion from France of immigrants promoting Islam (pp. 17, 73-74). These brief comments don’t do full justice to Lavignotte’s discussions. But I certainly agree with him that Ellul sometimes wrote too harshly and perhaps was not consistent in the application of his views. What we have here is an engaging, thoughtful introduction to Jacques Ellul by a caring friend.