

The Sacred, the Secular and the Holy:

The Significance of Jacques Ellul's Post-Christian Theology for Global Ethics

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Technique, Globalization and Apocalypse

In the beginning was the word, and the word gave birth to technique, for through language humans are able to imagine new worlds and devise the means create them. Among the earliest techniques to be invented were the techniques of agriculture which gave birth to the city through the domestication of plants and animals. Technique gave birth to the city, and then, in turn, the city became the midwife of all further techniques of the human, making possible over the centuries the emergence of the technological phenomenon, the comparative selection of the most efficient techniques in every area of human development. And with the self augmenting autonomy of technique came globalization -- a global totalism that, according to Ellul, threatens the disappearance of our very humanity. What drives this totalism is the sacralization of technique which domesticates us to its necessities by promising us utopia. Seduced by the utopian ideology of the technical society that promises to fulfill our every hope and dream we have surrendered our freedom and autonomy. So Ellul tells us: "The stains of human passion will be lost amid the chromium gleam" and we will have the luxury of a "useless revolt and of an acquiescent smile (*The Technological Society*, Vintage Books, Random House, 1964, pp.426-427)."

Globalization is the product of the growing interdependence of cultures through emerging global techno-economic and socio-cultural networks that the technological phenomenon requires. This process generates a generalized apocalyptic anxiety -- an uneasy sense that the world as we have known it is coming to an end. In a world of instant global communication and jet travel, time and space shrink and force a new awareness upon all the inhabitants of the earth. For these networks transcend local and national boundaries, and in the process they decenter and so challenge all previous forms of authority and identity, both religious and non-religious.

Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere

The ceremony of innocence is drowned;

The best lack all conviction, while the worst

Are full of passionate intensity.

("The Second Coming" p. 91, in *The Selected Poems and Two Plays of William Butler Yeats*, edited by M.L. Rosenthal (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

William Butler Yeats, in his poem *The Second Coming*, written in just after WWI, aptly captures the apocalyptic postmodern mood created by an emerging global civilization. Yeats' description became even more apt after WWII, for the appearance of the atomic bomb united the world in a common dread -- the dread of an apocalyptic global nuclear annihilation. After two world wars, the apocalyptic anxieties of decentered civilizations, each seeking to shore up its sacred way of life against the further invasion by other sacred ways of life via global media, global corporations and global travel, gave birth to new age of global terrorism. The global terror of nuclear annihilation of the late 20th century driven by the standoff between the USA and the USSR gave way to new terrorist permutations. The most notorious of the new terrorists, Osama bin Laden, who sought to explain his 9-11 attack on the twin towers of New York city in terms of the sacred and the profane, arguing that his goal was a global campaign to put a stop to the violation of the sacred lands of Islam by the profane West.

Western colonialism and two world wars forced globalization on human consciousness. In his 1979 book *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (University of Minnesota Press, translation 1984, French 1979) Jean-Francois Lyotard provided a vocabulary by which we could explain to ourselves what was happening. Decentering, he said was a mark of the collapse of the world's great metanarratives.

Even before we humans knew we lived on a globe we sought a global understanding of our humanity. As with the ancient philosophy of Stoicism's attempt to foster a global cosmopolitanism by asserting that to be human was to share a universal "logos" or "reason," the great religions also aspired to universality suggesting that what all humans have in common is God, or Brahman or Tao or Buddha nature (cosmic interdependent co-arising) etc. These religions offered what Lyotard called metanarratives (cosmic myths) that formed transcultural civilizations: Hindu civilization, Buddhist civilization, Jewish, Christian and Islamic civilizations. And then there is the most recent metanarrative – the utopian myth of scientific progress (whether in its Capitalist and Marxist versions) which came in the wake of the Enlightenment and secularization.

Each of these civilizational metanarratives provided a normative center defining what it means to be human. Globalization forces the clash of all such metanarratives and as a result, decenters all of them. Globalization and postmodern culture are two sides of the same coin in which apocalyptic rhetoric aptly catches the mood of the collapse of these metanarratives. The great cities of the world have become microcosms of the religious and cultural diversity of the globe. In the wake of WWII, the borders of civilizations interpenetrated as a result of mass media, global corporations and international travel and provoked and expressed this apocalyptic panic in anti-colonialist reactions to the totalism of dominant metanarratives, often turning poetic apocalyptic angst into literal apocalyptic scenarios in places like Iraq, Afghanistan and New York City (Sept. 11, 2001).

Globalization created the postmodern city. Our great cities have become decentered or rather pluri-centered. The collapse of a metanarratives does not mean they disappear but that they function differently. All the great metanarratives still exist but now they are typically found side by side in every great city. They do not provide a center for the life of the culture as a whole but for individuals and their subcultures. Consequently the public order of postmodern cities has no single sacred temple at their center, spinning a grand all-encompassing narrative which holds all things together. Rather, like Disneyworld and Epcot, different historical and cultural worlds exist side by side in postmodern cities without an integrating center. They are held together instead by technological networks operating behind the scenes. Ultra-postmodern cities like Las Vegas reveal most obviously the underlying reality of all great cities in a global civilization. The city has become eclectic and normless.

Nietzsche, in his vivid parable in *The Gay Science* (1882), tells of a madman entering the city square to announce the "death of God," suggesting that this is like the earth being cut loose from its sun: "Whither are we moving now,? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there any up or down left? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? (*The Gay Science*, 1882 in *The Portable Nietzsche*, pp 95-96, ed. Walter Kaufman, Viking Press, 1954 & 1968) Expressing the sense of a loss of center that came with the emerging global consciousness of the 19th century, nurtured by the invention of the social sciences, especially critical historiography and cross-cultural ethnography (anthropology), all metanarratives seem to him to have collapsed. Each culture had believed its metanarrative described the normative sacred order of the universe. Now, laid out side by side by the techniques of socio-historical consciousness, their very diversity showed each to be a relative human construct. The social sciences did not just report the death of God, they provided the knife with which God was murdered. In such an apocalyptic world, Nietzsche argued, norms would have to be replaced by the will to power and the transvaluation of all values.

Nietzsche said his madman/prophet came too soon but the reality he described was on its way. By 1965 that reality became manifest when the first human beings walked in space and for the first time viewed for themselves the truth of the world as a globe -- sending back images from space for all the earth to share. Cut loose from the earth these astronauts experienced Nietzsche's vertigo. Free floating in space, tethered only to their spacecraft, which way was up? Which way was down? The integral links between technique, globalization and apocalypse are summed up in this image. The movement from the Book of Revelation's description of the order of the cosmos collapsing as the sky disappears "like a scroll rolling up" (Rev 6: 12-14) to the loss of horizon by the early spacewalkers breaking free of the earth's gravity and the postmodern sense of loss a center in our great cities around the world sums up the history of civilization in a nut shell.

Ellul's Post-Christian Ethics -- Deconstructing the Sacred

Ellul's work can be understood as an exercise in postmodern, post-Christian theology. *As Lyotard explained, postmodern does not express an historical period so much as a style of thinking.* If post-modern represents a decentered style of thought, post-Christian, represents a decentered style of thinking about the role of Christianity in society. Its role is not to dominate from the center, creating a "Holy Roman Empire" but to subvert throughout the diaspora and transform from within through decentering strategies. Globalization tends to make decentered thinking a dominant trait of our time, nevertheless such

thinking can be found here and there throughout history and is at least as ancient as the story of Babel. Indeed, biblical thought tends to be decentered from the very beginning of the Torah, in the book of Genesis, which offers us two alternative stories of creation. This decentering is repeated when Christianity offers us four competing gospels. Perhaps Origen was right when he said that it was the Holy Spirit that put contradictions in the stories of the Bible in order to force us beyond the most superficial literal meaning of the Bible to grasp the deepest level of spiritual meaning.

Tension, contradiction, deconstruction -- these are the fruits of the Christian way of life. In the second century Tatian constructed the Diatessaron, the first attempt to harmonize the four gospels into one story. This attempt was rejected by the early church, preferring tension to synthesis. As in the Christian Gospels so in the Christian life, for Ellul the point is not to resolve the tensions but introduce tension and maladjustment as a limit on the totalism of the technicist way of life. Ellul's style of thinking is decentered through and through. His work as a sociologist and as a theologian seemed at first to be the product of dual personalities unrelated to each other. But gradually the two separate authorships were revealed to be part of a larger strategy not of synthesis but of deliberate tension and contradiction. Ellul describes his total critique of technological civilization as a "science of the city" that occurs at the disjunctive juncture of his sociology and his theology. Like Kierkegaard, his authorship offers a thesis and an antithesis but no synthesis. His "science of the city" interfaces a sociology of the sacred with a theology of the holy.

The key distinctions of this science -- the sacred, the secular and the holy -- were developed between 1946 and 1954. They evolved from the *Theological Foundation of Law* (1946) through *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948) to the linking of the sacred and the demonic in *Man and Money* (1953 - dates for the original French editions). But it is only two decades later, in his 1973 book *The New Demons (Les Nouveaux Possedes)*, that he maps out the terrain of the sacred and the holy in a way that decisively illuminates his strategy of juxtaposing the sacral necessities of technology with the desacralizing or sanctifying power of the scriptural Word of God theologically explicated. I consider *The New Demons* the Rosetta Stone of Ellul's authorship -- for the first time bringing sociology and theology together in one book. Yet his purpose is not synthesis but the creating of a tension between the two by adding a "Coda for Christians" to his sociological analysis of the religiosity of the technological society.

All of this prepares the way for his crowning theological work, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation (L'Apocalypse:architecture en mouvement, 1976)* where he tells us that the Greek word for judgment, *krisis*, means "to separate" which is the act by which God creates -- separating light from darkness, the heavens from earth, land from water, etc. Separation decenters and deconstructs our worlds, the way God's judgment of Babel decentered and deconstructed the totalism of Babel's one language and singular technological project. The *New Demons* and *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* show that Ellul's apocalyptic thought grasped the task of postmodern "deconstruction" in a unique brand of religious postmodernism.

In *Philosophy in a Time of Terror* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), Giovanna Borradori published interviews with Jurgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, followed by her own commentary on each. Borradori summarizes Derrida's deconstructive project as involving four steps: (1) identify the dualisms operative in the text and in society (the one leads to the other), (2) identify the hierarchy of the dualisms in the text and in society, (3) invert or subvert the dualistic hierarchies by showing what would happen if the negative and positive sides of each dualism were reversed as a way of exposing the ideology of the

will to power involved in the dualistic classifications, and finally (4) produce a third term “which complicates the original load-bearing structure beyond recognition” and so deforms and reforms it into a new liberating configuration. This is an apt description of Ellul's science of the city as well. Steps one and two are what Ellul accomplishes when he analyzes the sacralization of technique sociologically, dividing the world into sacred and profane. Steps three and four are accomplished when he responds theologically and ethically and transgresses, and so sanctifies and secularizes the sacred in the name of the holy, introducing apocalyptic hope and the possibility of freedom and justice into the technicist society.

Justice is not a word that immediately comes to mind when I think of postmodernism. For years I dismissed deconstruction as irresponsible relativism. In the hands of many of its practitioners it probably is. But I changed my mind on this with respect to Derrida after I began reading some of his later work which is deeply indebted to Immanuel Levinas. Derrida's later work is dominated by the themes of grace (the gift), hospitality, the messianic – and also the surprising insistence that justice is the one thing that cannot be deconstructed (*Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson, (Routledge, 1992), Chp. 1). The law, he said, can be deconstructed but only in the name of the demand for justice. In fact Derrida insists that justice is the driving force of deconstruction – they are, he argues, one and the same. For Derrida, justice, like Ellul's apocalypse of the holy, comes from the outside, as a gift – a gift that subverts all dualisms and makes new beginnings possible. Ellul is a religious postmodernist. His religious postmodernism is able to deconstruct the endless dialectic of absolutism and relativism (the totalist temptations that feed each other in a technicist civilization) that plagues secular postmodernism and so exorcise the “new demons” of the postmodern world. (See my book, *The Ethical Challenge of Auschwitz and Hiroshima: Apocalypse or Utopia?* (SUNY, 1993) which argues that this dialectic of absolutism and relativism is the underlying dialectic generating the Janus faced bipolar sacral myth of apocalypse/utopia that feeds our embrace of technical necessities. See also, *Religion and Globalization*, Oxford University Press, 2008 -- coauthored with John Esposito and Todd Lewis)

For Ellul, the sacred makes a virtue out of necessity in which our utopian hopes deliver us into some literal apocalyptic self-destructive destiny. Today, technique replaces nature as that new realm of necessity that surrounds and overwhelms us and on which we depend for our very existence. It takes the place of nature as the realm of the sacred -- the object of our fascination and dread. So a technical society creates a morality that both requires our obedience (always choosing the most efficient solution) and helps us adjust to those requirements by fostering the political illusion of being in control, even as psychological techniques are used to enable us to be "well adjusted" to our society's requirements. The sacred promotes a morality of efficiency under the guise of a rational ethical system which demands our obedience in order to fulfill our wildest hopes and dreams for utopia.

Given the totalism of technicism in an age of globalization, we might wonder whether a Christian can (or even should) cooperate with others, religious and non-religious, in creating a global ethic? Ellul's understanding of Christian ethics opens up a clear path for such trans-cultural and even interreligious cooperation. Decentering goes to the heart of Ellul's view of Christian ethics. Ellul argues that ethics must never become a rational system to which we conform. Ethics does not require unquestioning obedience but the questioning of unquestioning obedience. For Ellul, there is no such thing as a Christian ethic. Christians, like other human beings on the face of the earth, do have a pragmatic need to create an ethic, but such an ethic is always provisional human invention. Christians have used many such human

inventions, borrowing from Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc. But the Christian life is rooted not in some rational system of calculation but in the spontaneous inventiveness of life in Christ, who works in us to will and to do (Philippians 2:13) That inventiveness is the result of the Spirit that blows where it will, so that when we act, it is "I, yet not I, but Christ in me" who acts (Galatians 2:20). Ellul would agree with Augustine -- love and do what you will -- and also Aquinas, who describes Christian virtue as God working in us without us. The good to be done is God's will as given to me in the moment, in the situation I am confronted with that forces me to invent a response.

Nechama Tec, a sociologist, in her book, *When Light Pierced the Darkness* (Oxford University Press, 1986) studied those who rescued Jews in Poland during the Holocaust. She gives us good insight into ethics as *invention in the moment*. She tried to find the common denominator among all the rescuers. Did they share a common economic status; perhaps a common educational background, or maybe they were all devout church-goers? As it turned out it was none of these things. In fact going to church was more likely to make one anti-Semitic, since "the Jews" were often portrayed as the "bad guys" in the Gospel stories and the sermons based on them. It turned out the one thing she could find that rescuers held in common was a sense of "alienation" -- of being a stranger among one's own. This was hard to isolate because for one person this alienation might be due to having a physical disability which made one feel different than others. For another it might be growing up feeling as if one were the least favored child in the family. And yet another might say he or she grew up feeling less adept at sports than their peers. -- and so on.

What is common to all these experiences is "alienation" -- the experience of not fitting in and so being an outsider or stranger. Consequently, when strangers showed up at their door looking for rescue these rescuers spontaneously identified with them and took them in without agonizing over the decision. Samuel and Pearl Oliner, in their book, *The Atruistic Personality: Rescuers of Jews in Nazi Europe* (Free Press, Macmillan, 1988) conducted some 700 interviews trying to understand holocaust rescuers in comparison to their non-rescuing peers. They noted that 90% of the rescuers rescued one or more complete strangers, 76% said their motive was empathy or compassion, often described as an inner compulsion. They note that 70% acted within minutes of being asked for help, and 80% consulted no one.

The rescuers actions reflected the fundamental truth of biblical ethical insight -- remember welcome the stranger and love the stranger for "you know how the stranger feels" for you too were once strangers -- in the land of Egypt (Exodus 23:9, Deuteronomy 10:19). This call to remember what it is like to be a stranger illuminates the ethical insight essential for the invention of a global ethic.

In the biblical tradition, the most frequent commandment is to welcome the stranger, for by doing so one welcomes God, or God's messiah, or a messenger (angel) of God without knowing it (Genesis 18:1-5; Matt 25:35; Hebrews 13:2). The core of the command "to remember" creates an *empathic analogy*. In different ways we all experience being a stranger at some time in our life (often many times) and so we know what it is like to be a stranger. Jesus' restatement of the Pharisaic teaching, that we ought to do unto others as we would have them do to us, is grounded in this narrative tradition.

The call to remember that we were once strangers is a call that decenters us and our "religion" so that we can grasp the truth of the story of Babel. We do not find God at the center of our society in some sacred temple we have built to celebrate the idolatry of our own identity. That idolatry is built on the presupposition that all of us who share the same language and world view think we can annex God to

bless the worship of our own self-image. Given the centrality of the biblical command to welcome the stranger (repeated more often than any other command in the Torah), the moral of the story of Babel is that we find God not through uniformity of thought, belief and technique but through our encounter with the stranger. God confuses the language of the citizens of Babel not to punish them but to redirect their quest. You find God not by building a tower to heaven but by turning to the stranger who does not speak your language and is not like you. God is not found in sameness but in difference. As Isaiah suggests, God is the ultimate stranger whose thoughts are not our thoughts and ways are not our ways (Isaiah 55:8-9).

If we follow Ellul's sociological analysis, in a sacred society one expects to find God at the center, in the sacred temple that reinforces ethnocentric identity. In such a society, all who are the same are sacred and human, all others who are different are profane and less than human. Since we have moral obligations only to other human beings, the stranger can be excluded and dehumanized. But the biblical tradition of the holy is anti-ethnocentric. It decenters our expectations and insists that God cannot be found at the center of our society, or even at the center of our religion, but only outside of it -- in the stranger, the one who is not like us. That is the message of the story of Babel that is reinforced at Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descends upon the nascent church. When strangers from all over the Roman empire gather, each speaks his or her own language and yet each is understood by all (Acts 2:1-13). The Holy Spirit does not require that we all be the same but reveals God in difference and invites us to invent whatever action will honor that reality.

Hospitality is the direct embodiment of the holy. *Hospitality is the north star of global ethics. Any two or more religious and/or cultural traditions that emphasize hospitality to the stranger are able to work together synergistically to sanctify society, that is subvert and secularize the sacred order that would divide us.* By recognizing the humanity of the one who does not share our identity as the one who brings God into our lives, hospitality decenters us. Speaking as a Christian, we only bring Christ to the stranger when we go out seeking to meet Christ in the stranger. Whenever we welcome the stranger, we welcome God or God's messiah and God is all in all. (See my book on hospitality and universal salvation, *No One Left Behind: Is Universal Salvation Biblical?* (Authors Choice, 2011), an updated version of *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race* (Trinity International Press, 1996). While the sacred sacralizes society and divides the world into the sacred and profane, the holy desacralizes or secularizes and so sanctifies society, rendering it secular and open to the diversity of the whole human race (1 Timothy 4:10). But contrary to Max Weber, secularization is not a permanent accomplishment. The world can remain secular only through the constant iconoclasm of the holy. Without that constant subversion of the sacred by the holy, the secular itself becomes a new sacred order -- that is the main argument of Ellul's *The New Demons*.

When I wrote my dissertation on Ellul under Gabriel Vahanian's direction in 1978, I sought to do what Schleiermacher said was the task of the exegete -- to understand the author better than he understands himself. I argued that Ellul advocated the rehabilitation of the sacred with respect to "revolution" but seemed inconsistent in regarding "utopianism" as beyond the pale of such rehabilitation. With the aid of Karl Mannheim's book *Ideology and Utopia* (1936; Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.) I showed that apocalyptic thought can and often has been utopian, and that in fact Ellul's exegesis of the apocalyptic tradition and the ethics of apocalyptic hope can be interpreted, on his own premises, as leading to a

rehabilitation of utopianism. For Ellul, the *Book of Revelation* is a mirror for understanding and acting in the world here and now. It is not about changing worlds but about changing the world.

When I sent Ellul my book, *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (1981, Mellon Press --a revised version of my 500 page 1978 dissertation), Ellul wrote me to say "you are quite right on the subject of Apocalypse and Utopia." Moreover, he added that he was objecting to the popular use of the word "utopia" by "modern intellectuals" while, by contrast, he found Vahanian's use of "utopia/technique to be "very convincing" (personal letter to me, May 2, 1982) In Ellul's book, *The Humiliation of the Word* (1985; translation of *La parole humiliee*, 1981) we see evidence of this when he speaks for the first time about a positive meaning for the term "utopia." There Ellul argues that: "projects, utopias, intentions and doctrines -- all these belong to the order of truth, and are known and created by the word (p. 230)." Given his past merciless critique of "utopianism" this was a startling statement.

As with his rehabilitation of "revolution" it seems one can say of "utopia" also, that "whoever receives the revelation of God should give heed to men's hope, not in order to tell them that they are deluded . . . but to help them give birth to their hope" (*To Will and To Do*, p.81). As Ellul argues in *The Ethics of Freedom* (French two volume edition, 1973 & 1975, English translation 1976), Christian ethics does this in three ways that lead to global ethics: 1) dialogue and encounter, (2) realism and transgression, and (3) risk and contradiction. The first is not about getting together for some academic discussion of our similarities and differences (whether religious or political) but discovering these by joining together with all other human beings who are struggling to create a better world. Christians, oriented by an apocalyptic hope, do not place their hope in "this world" of politics and technique and so can work with others to transgress the sacred awe that conforms us to "this world." Such transgression opens the technicist society to its utopian possibilities. So Christians can and should work together with others of diverse religious and political views to invent those actions which will enable all to contradict the present order, not so much to overturn it as to transform it, so that freedom and justice are possible within it. In my view, these are exactly the tactics created by Gandhi and embraced by Martin Luther King, Jr. in the civil rights Vietnam era that gave birth to one of the first movements in global ethics.

Ellul's apocalyptic critique turns out to be both deconstructive in Derrida's sense and utopian in Gabriel Vahanian's sense. And as such, it opens the door to the participation of Christians in the invention of a global ethic that might assist in helping human beings of all religions and cultures give birth to their utopian hopes.

Global Ethics as Subversion of the Sacred: From Ellul to Gandhi and King

In the age of Enlightenment, Kant adopted the Stoic strategy and sought to transcend the "irrational diversity" of the world's religions by appeal to the universality of reason. In the view of many, that experiment appears to impose a Western rationalistic totalism on the globe. An alternate strategy was explored in Chicago in 1993 when the one hundredth anniversary of the *Parliament of The Worlds Religion* was celebrated by holding a second parliament. The holding of these two Parliaments is itself an expression of the solidifying global consciousness of humanity in all its religious diversity. Unlike the first Parliament, which focused on sharing ideas, the second sought to formulate a "global ethic" that all religions could agree to. The second Parliament sought to emulate the United Nations declaration of Human Rights created in

1948 in response to the atrocities of World War II, symbolized by the mass death produced at Auschwitz and Hiroshima. The U.N. did not explicitly base its declaration of rights on religious beliefs and practices. The Parliament, however, sought to do just that and, in the process, balance human rights with human responsibilities in a world of global interdependence.

Neither Kant's attempt nor the Parliament's attempt is entirely satisfactory. The first ends up imposing a new totalism and the second reduces ethics to whatever consensus we can agree on. Morality can be defined by consensus, ethics cannot. In Nazi Germany people agreed that killing Jews is good. However, something cannot be considered ethically good just because we agree that it is. Ellul would agree with Socrates, ethics is the questioning of what we commonly agree is good (the sacred), asking as Socrates did: Is what people say is good really good?

Ellul's understanding of ethics is faithful not only to the biblical tradition of the holy but also to the spirit of Socrates, for whom ethics is also a human response to the experience of the holy. To the degree that we can separate Socratic thought from the thought of Plato, it is clear that Socrates does not offer us an ethical theory but lives the ethical life by responding to his *daimon* -- a guiding spirit sent by "the god" who never tells him what to do but only warns him when he is plunging off in the wrong direction. Otherwise Socrates is left to his own discretion to invent a way of life centered in the wisdom that comes from questioning all things. Socrates tells us that it is his *daimon* that compels him to question and sends him as a gadfly to Athens, asking the troubling question -- is what we say is good, really good? Socrates describes this as his religious vocation and it is one that gets him arrested, tried and executed for (1.) impiety toward the gods who render the Athenian way of life sacred and (2.) corrupting the youth by teaching them to question the sacred authority of that way of life. Socrates is accused of being an atheist but says that cannot be since he is being compelled to question by a God other than the gods who sacralize the Athenian way of life. He comes, he suggests, not to destroy the Athenian way of life but to elevate it to meet the demands of justice. To put it in Ellul's terms, Socrates comes "to rehabilitate the sacred in the name of the holy" -- where the holy is construed as the Unseen Measure (the infinite) by which our humanity is measured.

In a similar fashion Ellul says he questions the sacred way of life of technological society, not in order to destroy this society but secularize it and so rehabilitate the sacred in order to meet the demands of the holy. So he insists, the Christian serves alongside of others seeking a revolutionary transformation of the technical society not in order to tell them they are deluded but in order to desacralize and so sanctify the city, so as to help others realize their utopian dreams. Ellul's post-Christian or decentered approach to ethics opens a path from Christian ethics to a global ethics of dialogue, transgression and contradiction.

It is desirable for religious communities around the world to identify shared understandings of what constitutes a "good life" across religions and cultures and promote that vision globally. But given Ellul's distinction between the sacred and the holy, we would not call whatever consensus we reached a "global ethic" but rather a "global morality." By contrast, a global ethic would be a critique of all global morality -- asking the Socratic question that challenges all consensus: Is what we claim is good, really good? Ethics in the Socratic sense, rehabilitates morality by questioning it by the measure of an Unseen Measure. Or in the biblical sense, questioning our morality by understanding ourselves as created in the image of a God without image. For the sacred by definition defines some as profane and less than human because "they are not like us." But the holy, as Gabriel Vahanian would say, is "iconoclastic," -- being created in the image of a God

without image we are all equal. No one can claim to "look more like God" than another" whether because of race, religion or nationality, etc. God is not the answer to all our questions but the question to all our answers. Our answers are always finite while our questions are infinite -- there is always one more question to force us to maintain our integrity and follow the questions wherever they lead, and so remain open to the infinite and further eschatological transformation.

Ellul argued that those who read his theology should not turn it into dogma but rather build on his analysis, or even challenge it, by thinking for themselves and inventing their own response to our common circumstances. In that spirit, my proposal is that a global ethic can emerge whenever and wherever two or more traditions emphasize narratives of hospitality to the stranger. For to welcome the stranger is precisely to recognize the humanity of the one who is not like me and does not share my story and identity. In the sphere of religion, Mohandas K. Gandhi appears to have led the first such global religious ethical movement and that movement had a decidedly postmodern orientation. Gandhi tapped the advances in technology that created first global media (radio, telephone, telegraph, film and the international press) to garner international support for his campaign against British colonialism as a form of Western domination. At the same time, he also used the media to promote global interdependence and interreligious harmony. Gandhi thought globally and acted locally, and his movement (both in South Africa and later in India) attracted followers from diverse religions and cultures, showing that religious action can be decentered or multicentered and still promote human dignity.

Most importantly, Gandhi's own ethic of non-violent civil disobedience was forged through an international dialogue (as we have suggested) with the likes of Tolstoy and Jesus' teachings of the sermon on the Mount, even as Martin Luther King, Jr. developed his ethic through an international dialogue with Gandhi and the Gita. Gandhi and King exemplify the strategy of dialogue, transgression and contradiction. The strategy of civil disobedience was built on inter-religious global dialogue and sought to insert tension into a sacred society in order to transgress and contradict its order and so rehabilitate its sacred order to reflect the holy, replacing divisions of sacred and profane with the oneness of humanity. (See my *Comparative Religious Ethics: A Narrative Approach to Global Ethics* (Wiley/Blackwell, 2011 -- co-authored with two of my former students, Dell deChant and David Lantigua).

In response to the reach of Western colonialism around the world, a global ethic began to take shape with Gandhi's challenge to the British empire's hold on India.. Then, in the next generation the Gandhian model spread. This occurred during the Civil Rights-Vietnam era in America. with the forging of a common ethic among the spiritual children of Gandhi -- Martin Luther King, Jr., Abraham Joshua Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh and, in his own way, even Malcolm X. This generation, following Gandhi, showed that a global ethic does not have to erase diversity. Rather through passing over and coming back, this diversity can create a synergy in which a common ethical coalition can form to transform the world without its members having to sacrifice their distinctive narratives and traditions. Each speaks his own language yet each is understood by all, finding in each other's lives models of ethical inventiveness.

My understanding of global ethics is embodied in the process that John Dunne in *The Way of All the Earth* (1971) calls "passing over" to another's religion and culture and "coming back" to one's own, finding and sharing wisdom through a global dialogue among those struggling for social justice. That dialogue is not one of those embarrassing, overly self-conscious, abstract academic discussions about how we are different or similar. It is rather the unselfconscious sharing of insight (from our diverse traditions) while engaged in the

common struggle to transform the world. It is a struggle that leads persons like Martin Luther King, Jr., (a black Baptist preacher) Abraham Joshua Heschel (a Hasidic Rabbi) and Thich Nhat Hanh (a Buddhist monk) to form ethical coalitions in the 1950s and 1960s for subversive actions that will desacralize and sanctify society.

For Gandhi, ethics is not about obedience to rules but disobedience -- a civil disobedience that subverts all rules in order to protect the freedom and hopes of every individual around the world. As I have noted, Ellul argued, that it is not the job of Christians to tell others that they are deluded in their hopes for a better world but to work alongside all persons, whatever their religious or philosophical commitments, to help them realize their hopes. A Christian, on this understanding, is committed to dialogue with all persons and the subversion of all totalisms that imprison and dehumanize human beings everywhere. And Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Thich Nhat Hanh embody Ellul's model of the holy as the experience that calls into question and desacralizes all totalisms by desacralizing and subverting their sacred orders through civil disobedience.

In the case of Gandhi, having gone to England to study law as a young man, he was introduced to the writing of Leo Tolstoy and Tolstoy's understanding of the Sermon on the Mount. The message of nonviolence—love your enemy, turn the other cheek—took hold of Gandhi. And yet he did not become a Christian. Rather, he returned to his parents' religion and culture, finding parallels to Jesus' teachings in the Hindu tradition. And so Gandhi read Hindu scriptures with new insight, interpreting the *Bhagavad Gita* allegorically (citing Paul's saying, the letter killeth but the spirit gives life) as a call to resist evil by nonviolent means. And just as Gandhi was inspired by Tolstoy as he led the fight for the dignity of the lower castes and outcasts within Hindu society and for the liberation of India from British colonial rule, so Martin Luther King, Jr., would later use the ideas of Gandhi in the nonviolent struggle for the dignity of black citizens in North America.

Gandhi never became a Christian and King never became a Hindu. Nevertheless, Gandhi's Hindu faith was profoundly transformed by his encounter with the Christianity of Tolstoy, just as King's Christian faith was profoundly transformed by his encounter with Gandhi's Hinduism. What they shared was the invention of a secular ethic in response to their experiences of the holy. In the lives of these twentieth-century religious social activists we have examples of "passing over" as a transformative postmodern spiritual adventure.

Whereas in the secular forms of postmodernism all knowledge is relative, and therefore the choice between interpretations of any claim to truth is "undecidable," Gandhi and King opened up an alternate path. While in matters of religion, truth may be undecidable, they showed that acceptance of diversity does not have to lead to the kind of ethical relativism that so deeply troubles fundamentalists. For in the cases of Gandhi and King, passing over led to a sharing of wisdom among traditions that gave birth to an ethical coalition in defense of human dignity across religions and cultures— creating a global ethic. For Gandhi and King, ethical actions arise spontaneously out of their experiences of the holy. For each, such experiences desacralize the divisions of sacred and profane produced by the sacralization of society. Civil disobedience contradicts these divisions and so sanctifies society rendering it secular and so hospitable to all strangers.

The spiritual adventure initiated by Gandhi and King involves passing over (through imagination, through travel and cultural exchange, and especially through a common commitment to social action to promote

social justice) into the life and stories and traditions of others, sharing in them and, in the process, coming to see one's own tradition through them. Such encounters are a form of hospitality that enlarges our sense of human identity by embracing the stranger. The religious metanarratives of the world's civilizations may have become "smaller narratives" in an age of global diversity, but they have not lost their power. Indeed, in this Gandhian model, it is the sharing of the wisdom from another tradition's metanarratives that gives the stories of a person's own tradition a new synergistic power. Each person remains on familiar religious and cultural ground, yet each is profoundly influenced by the other to insert an element of tension into society in the name of justice for the stranger.

By their lives, Gandhi and King demonstrated that, contrary to the fears raised by fundamentalists, the sharing of a common ethic and of spiritual wisdom across traditions does not require any practitioners to abandon their religious identity even as it subverts the fears of "secularists" that religion must always lead to a new inquisition - an new totalism. Instead, Gandhi and King offered a model of unity in diversity.

One of the ways Ellul's work furthers this global synergy is by arguing for a Christian understanding of salvation as universal. Ellul's vision of universal salvation operates to subvert the Christian impulse to turn global ethics into a new totalism. The Christian temptation to totalism plagues Christian history from Constantine to the Inquisition and the global missionizing of the colonial period. This temptation has consistently derived its power from the ideology of evangelism as the task of saving all of humanity by converting all to share the Christian worldview. That ideology is a form of the totalistic ideology of Babel before its fall into the diversity of language and worldview, a totalistic ideology that Christians have repeatedly fallen back into throughout history. But Jesus' command was for Christians to be the salt of the earth, not to turn the whole earth into salt. Evangelism is not about making the whole world Christian but spreading the Good News of God's hospitality to the whole human race, not just "believers" (I Timothy 4:10 -- See my book, *No One Left Behind: Is Universal Salvation Biblical? 2011*, or its earlier version *The Coming of the Millennium: Good News for the Whole Human Race, 1996*.)

Both Gandhi and King, like Ellul, rejected the privatization of religion, insisting that religion in all its diversity plays a decisive role in shaping the public order of society. And like Ellul, both were convinced that only a firm commitment to nonviolence on the part of religious communities would enable this without society returning to the kind of religious wars that accompanied the Protestant Reformation and the emergence of modernity. Following Ellul's perspective, I would argue that a global ethic would be human invention created in response to the experience of the holy to help us keep our world open to further eschatological development, an apocalyptic anticipation of a new creation in which all peoples of the earth gather into a city without a sacred temple at its center, a postmodern city where all strangers are welcome and so God is all in all.

In *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, Ellul can be read as suggesting that God's true intention for the human city is revealed. The narrative of Revelation deconstructs the sacral imagination of the cities of the earth, summed up in the city of Babylon, by describing the destruction of these cities centered on their sacred temples and sacred ways of life. But before they are destroyed all their citizens exit these cities and "stand at a safe distance." (Revelation, Chp. 18, especially vs. 9, 11, 15, 17). Then the demons of the religious imagination that sacralize each city (and seduce the citizens of each to attempt to totalize their way of life in conflict with every other) are then consigned to the lake of fire.

In *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, Ellul describes the New Jerusalem as the reverse image of the fallen global city. For while the cities of the earth seek to totalize their respective sacred ways of life by the will to power, in the New Jerusalem, which has no temple at its center, all the tribes of the earth in all their diversity are gathered in and God is all in all. On Ellul's reading, Apocalypse is not about changing worlds but about changing the world. *The Book of Revelation* is an iconoclastic mirror for the world in this present moment. Even the contemporary postmodern global technicist city, once desacralized, becomes open to its truly utopian destiny as the City of God, in which (to paraphrase the story of Pentecost) each speaks his or her own language and yet each is understood by all.