

Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker Movement

Jeff Dietrich and Katherine Temple

July 1991

Contents

Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker of the Next Century – <i>Therefore Choose Life</i>	3
Jacques Ellul: A Catholic Worker Vision of the Culture	7
Born-Again Catholic Workers A Conversation between Jeff Dietrich and Katherine Temple	11

Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker of the Next Century

– *Therefore Choose Life*

by Jeff Dietrich

His breathing came in labored, spasmodic gasps. First the chest would heave a great sigh, then the head would snap back upon the pillow with such force that the jaws popped open automatically, sucking air like a greedy baby. Then came the gurgling sounds. Each hungry breath pushed his face deeper into conformity with the clear plastic oxygen mask that gave him the only sustenance he cared about now.

Any fool could see that Isaiah was dying, but when confronted, the doctors insisted that he was doing fine, and why didn't we all go home and get some sleep. Lots of people had pulled through this. And besides, having eight visitors was against hospital regulations. Their bland professional palliatives stood in marked contrast to our grieving countenances. Isaiah died four hours later.

It is almost impossible for health care professionals to accept the reality of death. In fact, for all the professionals who keep our country running smoothly, the denial of death is essential. As Walter Brueggemann writes in his book *The Prophetic Imagination*, "The royal consciousness leads people to numbness, especially to numbness about death. It is the task of prophetic ministry to bring people to engage their experiences of suffering to death."

As Catholic Workers we find ourselves engaged with suffering, despair and death on a daily basis. We believe that this is the authentic reality of the culture, but the message of the culture consistently confirms in powerful ways the very opposite. Until we can understand with some clarity that the "truth of the culture" is grounded in the worship of false gods, we are condemned to a schizophrenic existence.

The theology of Jacques Ellul offers us the prophetic clarity of naming with exquisite perfection the idolatries of contemporary culture. As the late William Stringfellow said, "For Ellul, the affirmation of death is the ultimate reality and hence the ground for immediate moral decision. [He recognizes] an idolatry of death in which all humans and societies are caught up."

Ellul believes that the contemporary manifestation of this idolatry of death lies in our worship of the "sacred ensemble" of techniques. "From the moment that techniques,

the state or production are facts, we are required to worship them... This is the very heart of modern religion."

Simply put, technique is the systematic reduction of all human thought, action and organization to the logic and efficiency of the machine. (See *Catholic Agitator*, June 1990.)

The first duty of the Christian, Ellul says, is "to be aware... At the present time, all so-called progress consists in developing this technical framework of our civilization. All parties, whether revolutionary or conservative, liberal or socialist, of the right or left, agree to preserve these fundamental phenomena: the primacy of production, the continual growth of the state, the autonomous development of technique."

This situation is monstrous because it amounts to the virtual enslavement of humanity to the principalities and powers-the spiritual force of evil in the world. If we are not "awake and aware," we will enthusiastically cooperate with this demonic power. "If we let ourselves drift along the stream of history, without knowing it, we will have chosen the power of suicide, which is at the heart of the world. ... We cannot have many illusions."

To the extent that our actions are founded upon the mythology of the contemporary reality, rather than the word of God, we reinforce this demonic direction. The mythology of progress, revolution and youth are the foundation of all our cultural ideologies. All of the motivating forces of the culture, from advertising copy to political propaganda, to the idealization of humanitarian impulses in medicine, education and public service are founded upon these false mythologies.

We cannot fight the world of power and technique, more and greater power and technique. Our situation is not unlike the Allied forces of World War II fighting the demonic forces of Nazism with the same tactics as Hitler: mass bombings, propaganda and terrorism of civilian populations. They won the physical war, but the demonic spirituality of Hitlerism triumphed in the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and the subsequent willingness of U.S. foreign policy to transform the entire globe into a nuclear concentration camp.

God does not work through "technical means." Most contemporary Christians, especially Catholics, have an unconscious Chardinian theology. Teilhard de Chardin was the Jesuit paleontologist who believed that technology was an extension of natural biological evolution, and that as it developed and became more sophisticated, so too would human culture and human consciousness. This process would eventually lead to the encirclement of the entire globe by "noosphere," a cloud of higher consciousness culminating in the second coming of Christ.

But this view of culture and technology is, if not blasphemous, anti-scriptural. Any overview of the Hebrew-Christian Scripture would clarify that, except in rare cases, God only works through human beings. The Holy Spirit does not work through the electoral process, through war, revolution, scientific progress or the space program. Neither does the Holy Spirit work through mass movements, political reform or institutions. The Holy Spirit only works through people.

We cannot use the means of the world to bring in God's Kingdom of peace and justice. We cannot *bring in* peace and justice, says Ellul, we can only *be* peace and justice. The Christian must be "the leaven in the loaf," "the light in the darkness," "the sheep among wolves." In other words, if we want the Kingdom of God to be a reality, then we must use the "means of the Kingdom" to achieve that end. If we "seek first God's Kingdom and righteousness," then all the other things, like peace, justice, sisterhood and brotherhood "will be added unto us."

Ellul's theological perspective radically liberates us from having to be successful, from having to respond to the false challenge of either violent revolution or liberal reform with which means the world is constantly seducing us. Now we don't have to kill all of the capitalists, nor do we have to go to graduate school to get an MSW, nor do we have to become a non-profit corporation and raise millions of dollars or make millions of converts. In short, we don't have to be effective!

We have been liberated to be the means of God, a channel for the Holy Spirit to act in the world. But this does not mean that we can just *be*, it means that we must be engaged with the suffering reality of the world, the sinfulness of the world, the injustice of the world. We must be present in the places of darkness, manifesting the Kingdom, opening a channel for the Holy Spirit to come into the world.

This is the essence of the "tension" that Ellul talks about. As Christian realists, we must be engaged with a sinful world, but aware that it is not possible for us to do anything about it. Our situation is not unlike the women who stayed with Jesus at the foot of the cross. Their love was stronger than their illusions, unlike the male disciples who had expected to become regional administrators in the new "Jesus corporation," the women had a more authentic orientation, and thus remained faithful to the end.

We live in a crucified world. We cannot make it uncrucified any more than the women could rescue Jesus from his cross. But, like the women, we will not abandon that suffering reality. The response of the women was to mourn and to grieve, to enter into the darkness of suffering.

We picked up Isaiah's body at the coroner's office and brought him to our house. We sat with him throughout the night, watching and praying. In the morning we put him in the old blue van and drove him over to Dolores Mission for the funeral. Finally, we buried him in a plot at the back corner of Sacred Heart Cemetery. We grieved the dying of a friend. We grieved the injustice that only in death could this homeless man finally have a home. We grieved the dying of a culture that numbs itself to the pain of the poor, and blinds itself to the reality of death.

Brueggemann says that "anguish is the door to historical existence, that only those who embrace the reality of death will receive new life." We believe that the denial of death and the subsequent narcissism that causes our insatiable consumption of products and experiences defines the essence of contemporary culture.

As Christopher Lasch says in his book *The Culture of Narcissism*, "There is a growing despair of the changing society, even of understanding it... Industrial civilization gives rise to a philosophy of futility, a pervasive fatigue, a disappointment with achieve-

ments that finds an outlet in changing the more superficial things... It addresses itself to the spiritual desolation of modern life, and proposes consumption as a cure."

But we refuse to take the cure. Trivial entertainments, superficial relationships and compulsive shopping are not the cure; they merely address the symptoms of our schizophrenic condition. We seek unitive wholeness and with Brueggemann we recognize "that all satiation is an eating of self to death." We refuse to be numb and narcotized-the prophetic call is to be aware and awake. We will not worship at the altar of the false god of technique. We will not accept the bland palliatives of the technocratic priesthood. When we encounter suffering, we will mourn. We will respond with compassionate engagement. Wholeness comes when we refuse any longer to deny death. Wholeness comes when we respond to the Word of God which calls us out of the bondage of death and oppression of life and liberation. In the words of Deuteronomy: "I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live."

Jacques Ellul: A Catholic Worker Vision of the Culture

by Katharine Temple

About twenty years ago, in my first flush of enthusiasm at "discovering" the work of Jacques Ellul, someone came up to me and said, "I am surprised you're taken up with such a depressing thinker. How can you bear to read him, let alone find him helpful?" I was a bit taken aback. Still, it has to be admitted that M. Ellul is not widely read; even when he is respected, he is kept somewhat at arm's length. There is no such thing as an "Ellul school" emerging and no sweep of Ellul-ism to attract attention. Nor does M. Ellul himself seek to inspire a following of devotees. The net result, as far as I can see, is that his insights have been dismissed far too lightly.

It is always hard to know for sure how you arrive anywhere, but at the outset, I picked up *The Technological Society* because of a desire to know more about what makes our society tick. And also I was feeling rather jaded about the social analyses around me. Although disconcertingly massive, this masterpiece in no way dispirited me. On the contrary, it brought into focus my gut reactions to a whole host of things-trends that made me distinctly uneasy, despite the more popular Western view that ours is the best of all possible worlds, or the even more socially aware sentiment that things are wretched but inevitably going to get better. The very starkness of the book was bracing in that it gave me a toe-hold to articulate what was actually going on around me. Because he was refreshingly accurate, words like "depressing" or "pessimistic" seemed quite beside the point. He helped to unveil the world for me. As George Grant, a Canadian political philosopher, has written:

He [Ellul] does not write of necessity to scare men, but to make them free. I am certainly freer for having read this book... Keats put perfectly my response to this book. "Then felt I like some watcher of skies/When a new planet swims into his ken." Not to have read this book is to choose to remain socially myopic when somebody offers you free the proper spectacles.

The Technological Society is not a theological book, so for some time I had no idea that Ellul is also a biblical scholar, and I can't say that I really cared. While I had not exactly fallen away from faith, I was decidedly wishy-washy and nothing much in the field of theology grabbed me. It was all in abeyance, on the back burner, as I turned to other matters. Almost by chance, I happened upon M. Ellul's *Violence* and picked

it up because it looked a lot shorter than *The Technological Society*. It turned out to be the first work of non-fiction that ever kept me up all night.

Although reading *Violence* was not a "conversion experience," it was an illumination that Christianity could make a unique difference and theology has a cutting edge. It made me want to read the Bible again in a new way and to enter the fray again as a Christian. In thinking about the impact of this book, I am reminded of what M. Ellul has said about Karl Barth's influence on him. "Barth went beyond the orthodox-liberal controversy." What's more, this possibility came to me in the same way he found it in Karl Barth.

First I discovered through him a flexible understanding of Scripture. Barth was infinitely less systematic than Calvin, and he was completely existential at a time when this concept did not exist. He put biblical thought in direct contact with actual experience; it wasn't arm-chair theology.

Over the years it has been Ellul's ongoing clarity about the world and his loyalty to the Bible, through thick and thin, that have most deeply impressed me. In person, his qualities of sanity, constancy, and attentiveness are very much in evidence, personal traits that also come through in his semi-autobiographical *In Season, Out of Season* (1982). To this day, it still comes as a mild surprise when some Christians find him too negative for words.

Quite a few people object less to his descriptions than to his refusal to "give the right answer at the back of the book." Since Ellul has never suffered from a failure of nerve or personal aloofness, the most important thing is to understand *why* he rejects the role of guru.

[W]e learned that the Bible is not a collection of answers God has given to our questions; on the contrary, it is the place where God addresses us, where He asks *us* the question we have to answer. To hear the word of God is to hear the question which God asks of me, to which I must give a response out of my life and faith. I am made responsible (compelled to give a response). Thus when this all-powerful God speaks, He does not annihilate us, but renders us answerable.

Within this perspective, there's no game-plan to be imposed. The answers have to be worked out and re-worked again and again, always concretely and provisionally, by the faithful, within the scope of biblical freedom.

As Jean Bose, Barth's most loyal disciple said, "One can be so much more flexible and open to all things when one has a central theological certainty." Barth also brought me a freedom with regard to the biblical text-the only and unique pillar of the revelation of God, of course, but thanks to which God speaks in a multiple and diverse manner, allowing us to mine the multiple riches from this unique treasure.

His intention is to shake us from our lethargy, to direct Christian attention to a path that is really neither fundamentalist nor liberal nor mystical. He follows a different route and resists the temptation to offer conclusions that might short-circuit our own engagement with the Bible.

In all of this, I think it would be misleading to suggest that Ellul has kept total silence on immediately practical questions or that he has had no influence in this regard. In my case, prolonged exposure to his biblical studies, his persistent questions, his espousal of something other than the *status quo*, has left its mark

One major difference he's made in my life comes from his deep attachment to the Hebrew Scriptures. His studies of the early chapters of Genesis, Jonah (*The Judgment of Jonah*, 1971), and his reflections on such neglected books as 1 Kings (*The Politics of God and the Politics of Man*, 1972), for instance, are unique in contemporary biblical commentary. By accepting that Hebrew Scripture as being fully the Word of God, Ellul has managed to avoid the teachings of contempt and the damage inflicted by historical criticism. As soon as I tried to pursue this kind of study further, I found myself a bit unsure about where to go next, so I asked him directly for help. He suggested that Christians do well to learn from the great teachers in the Jewish tradition, if our own understanding of Scripture is not going to shrivel up. I took his advice seriously, and now learn Hebrew Bible from the rabbis who have revered it most as *the* guide for life. From them, I am beginning to get intimations about what he calls the "multiple riches," and so to see new depths to the question, "What is to be done?"

M. Ellul also quite indirectly helped me become open to the Catholic Worker movement, founded in 1933 by the peasantworker-scholar Peter Maurin. It may sound odd to claim that an arch-Protestant pushed me toward a group with arch-Roman Catholic origins, and it is true that the links are not strictly linear. Although both are French, the differences between Ellul and Maurin-differences that go back to the original split between the two traditions over matters such as tradition itself, philosophy, Christendom, agrarianism, the sacraments -seem massive; and yet I am convinced that what binds that two men together is stronger than whatever separates them. Each has turned against the tide to develop critical analyses that move us beyond ideologies and state power; each is rooted in a Christianity that pre-dates confidence in "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"; each has understood the Christian response as one of personalism, self-sacrifice, poverty, the daily works of mercy; each is a Christian intellectual in the true sense.

But Peter Maurin had a co-founder in the Catholic Worker-Dorothy Day. Inspiration took root at their meeting. In one of his "Easy Essays," Peter said, "Man proposes and woman disposes." Whatever else we may think of this aphorism, it aptly describes what happened in their case, for Dorothy always called Peter her mentor.

Peter's idea of hospices seemed like a simple and logical one to me; hospices such as they had in the Middle Ages are certainly very much needed today. But I like even better his talk about personal responsibility. He quoted St. Jerome, that every house should have a "Christ's room" for our brother who is in need-.. Peter brought up the

idea of the paper the first time I met him and he kept harping on it, day after day. He told me I needed a Catholic background, and he came day after day with books and papers and digests of articles which he either read aloud or left with me to read. It was impossible to be with a person like Peter without sharing his simple faith that the Lord would provide what was necessary to do His work.

She was the ideal student, who absorbed his synthesis and then put the ideas into practice. Throughout her books and columns in *The Catholic Worker*, she passed along the vision she had received from Peter, by writing about the daily attempts to live it. When a friend gave me a subscription to the paper, my thought was, "Whether she has heard of him or not, this is the kind of thing Ellul is talking about. This is one answer as to what you can do when you get up in the morning.

Born-Again Catholic Workers

A Conversation between Jeff Dietrich and Katherine Temple

This conversation ... was conducted by phone in May of this year [1990], Kassie has lived and worked at the New York Catholic Worker for the last 15 years. She is an editor of the Catholic Worker newspaper, and has been an avid Ellul scholar for over 20 years. We are grateful for her advice and encouragement in our efforts to understand and apply Ellul's thoughts to the Worker movement. For us, Kassie best embodies the highest qualities of Peter Maurin's worker/scholar tradition.

JEFF DIETRICH: I talked to you a while back, and I told you how excited I was about the reading I have been doing in Jacques Ellul. I feel like a born-again Catholic Worker, if one can say that. I feel that what Jacques Ellul has done is to give us a consistent, contemporary critique of the culture in which we live, which makes what the Catholic Worker does so pertinent. I feel like sometimes people just dismiss us as "saints" or just nice people. Folks say, "Oh, you do such nice work;" "You're such good people." That's not why we're doing it. We want to be prophetic. We want to do it as a prophetic criticism of the culture.

To have someone like Ellul, who gives you this elaborate perspective to work from, I feel liberated by this perspective, which I know some people find rather depressing.

KATHARINE TEMPLE: We have discussed this, and I was thinking as you were talking that I knew some of the writings of Jacques Ellul before I knew much about the Catholic Worker, and I was very taken with his analysis of the society and his other writings about what it means to be Christian in the world in which we live. And as I learned more about the Catholic Worker (this was before I came) it seemed like the philosophy and the theology of the Catholic Worker was the only movement that seemed to resonate with this same kind of understanding.

In some ways, I came to the Catholic Worker via the writings of Jacques Ellul. Our two comings to see the relationship between the Catholic Worker and Jacques Ellul are from different times, but I think the same relationship is there.

JEFF: I feel like as a Catholic Worker movement, we really haven't updated our analysis of the culture since Peter [Maurin] died. And the way Ellul talks about the technological society, I feel as though Peter Maurin, if he were alive today, would either

be saying the same thing or writing "Easy Essays" about Jacques Ellul. What do you think?

KATHARINE: Well, I think that's very true. I think they come out of the same culture. They were both born in France. Peter, of course is older, but in terms of the environment for social analysis, they both did come out of the same intellectual and social world.

JEFF: What are some of those similar influences?

KATHARINE: First of all, they both come out of the first part of the twentieth century. There was the impact of the industrial revolution in France and that realm of social thought that began to question if this has brought about the benefits that people were certain it was going to bring about.

The intellectual ferment in France at that time was very strong and very rigorous. Also, although Ellul is a Protestant and Peter Maurin was Roman Catholic, the world of Christian thought in France at that time was minority thinking. Nonetheless, some very strong critiques of what was happening as a result of the industrial revolution from a Christian perspective were very active at that time.

Of course, Peter came out of a peasant background, and I think the evils or the dark side of the industrial revolution seemed to strike him from the very beginning. Whereas, Ellul's parents were immigrants, and he was brought up on the docks of Bordeaux, and grew up in the urbanized world of France. So he came directly with the workers' struggles and directly in contact with Karl Marx. Peter came out of an entirely earlier culture.

I think what is needed to be done in terms of a social analysis focusing on the problems of the world would be one which they would share as a requirement for social thought I think Ellul would see Peter Maurin's thought as focusing directly on industrial society and what it has become and what it has done to people. Ellul, on the other hand, has focused since 1935 on what he calls "the question of technique." His thought is that industrial society has moved to a different phase. The ways and means of the machine age have passed on to a different stage, thus your analysis would be different

JEFF: What I thought was so validating is that in reading Ellul I felt supported in what the Catholic Worker does in simple living, the green revolution.

Ellul makes this contrast between the "means of God"-that God can only work through human beings, that God very rarely works directly in the world, that God most often chooses a human medium through which to work. And that God cannot work through the technical means of the world. That the more our culture becomes enslaved to technical means, the more difficult it is for God to work in the world.

Also there are all those metaphors from the Gospels that are so important to Ellul-to be the leaven in the loaf, to be a light unto the world, to be wakeful and watching, the pearl of great price. All of these things are the "subtle way" of the Catholic Worker.

You often feel overwhelmed by the means of the world. I know I've always had a tendency to buy into that perspective of "We're not being very effective here." So you stick with the Catholic Worker way - out of a kind of faithful, spiritual perspective.

What Ellul does is give you the ability to look critically at what the technical means are and say, "No, you can't use these to bring about the Kingdom of God." You can't use mass elections to bring about the Kingdom of God, you can't use television and radio to bring about the Kingdom. TV evangelists are not doing the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not working through technical means. Each person has to have a conversion of the heart and be open to the word of God, and be ready to be used by the Holy Spirit. That's the only way it works and none of us want to believe that

KATHARINE: That's a very clear summary of what Ellul is saying to Christians, and I think it's a very clear summary, perhaps in a different language, of what Peter and Dorothy would have been saying. That is the call to all Christians, not just a select few, that we are all called to witness to the way of God, the truth of God, which is different from the powers of the world. But they would both say very specifically that we need to do it in the world in which we live, and know that world. You can't be a light about (sic) a society that was a hundred years ago and not take into account what is going on now, what it is that is enslaving us now.

Sometimes Peter wouldn't use that language, but when Peter talked about voluntary poverty, for example, not only is that a very traditional means or root of Catholic thought, but he was talking to a society that is dominated by money - money is enslaving people. The weight of consumerism is literally killing people, and the Christian is called to open that up and liberate people from that force.

And that the means and ends, and this is a theme that both Ellul and Peter have very much in common: Is the means and end? If you want a society that is personalist, communitarian, based on the well-being of the other, you can't reach that through impersonal, bureaucratic fund-raising means. Dorothy used to say, "All the way to heaven is heaven," which is another statement of the "little way" or the question of ends and means.

Since the "efficient" means of having spectacular results on a large scale quickly is a dominant mode of this society, it is even more important to be cognizant of the fact that if you are going to have a society where it is easier to be good or have some sort of cell in the old society, you're going to have to use different means than those that prevail around us.

JEFF: And this is exactly why the Catholic Worker espouses an anarchist, non-stateist perspective. But again, there hasn't been a strong intellectual groundwork or foundation for an anarchist perspective, and we all get sucked into the cultural ritual of elections and the media surrounding it.

KATHARINE: We've certainly had many discussions around here about whether people prefer the word personalist or anarchist, which in one understanding can be seen as the same. But I think the importance of the anarchist critique, and certainly in

social theory Ellul gives an anarchist critique of technological society, in distinction to a Marxist critique or a Ubertal critique, is that the form of anarchism that the Cathollic Worker would espouse would be a personalist anarchism. It is precisely a critique of stateism-that the increasing power of the state is the source of domination and that in our relationship to the state we need to be cognizant that it isn't one entity among many, so you can say, well, we'll take the advantages from the state that we can and it won't have any repercussions on how we run our house. Rather, the state is a key point in our analysis of this society to see where the increasingly monolithic power structure is.

JEFF: I was particularly taken with Ellul's introduction in his book *The Political Illusion* where he talks about the French Revolution. We tend to think of kings of France as being absolute, total monarchs, the "Sun King" and all that. Before the French Revolution, the king had difficulty creating a standing army, he couldn't raise enough taxes to support a drive for empire. But after the Revolution, once the king was deposed and all people became part of the state and responsible for the state and to the state, then everybody, of course, served willingly. Then, once so-called democracy was there, people voluntarily enslaved themselves and gave themselves over to a taxation system and a system of law that they would never have done under a monarchy.

When you start looking at it that way, the whole idea of people just giving themselves over completely to the state, you need to have a stronger foundation to this anarchist-personalist perspective. I think that's what Ellul gives us.

KATHARINE: Yes, at the end of that book, he talks about what is needed, and these are just a few little excerpts from that:

It is important above all, never to permit oneself to ask the state to help us. Indeed we must try to create positions in which we reject and struggle with the state, not in order to modify some element of the regime or force it to make some decision, but much more fundamentally, in order to permit the emergence of social, political, intellectual, artistic bodies, associations, interest groups or economic or Christian groups totally independent of the state. What is needed are groups capable of extreme diversification of the entire society's fundamental tendencies, capable of escaping the unitary structure, presenting themselves not as negations of the state, which would be absurd, but as *something else* not under the state's tutelage.

JEFF: He would say that the United States should not be patting itself on the back and saying we finally succeeded in winning the Cold War, and that the same kind of liberty and freedom that the United States has is just about to prevail throughout the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

KATHARINE: I think Ellul would agree with Peter and Dorothy, particularly Dorothy, who focused on the state and the large bureaucratic institutions. But he would say that the thinking is still too much in terms of the Marxist "mode of production."

The mode of production has changed in the Catholic Worker analysis, even though Dorothy had the insight that we need to better coordinate and describe it in a way that is more exact

For instance, the role of the computer isn't simply shunned because Peter didn't like machines, but the computer is something quite different from other machines, and that's what we should be looking to.

JEFF: It seems to me that Ellul, in *The Technological System*, is saying that the computer as an information processor created a completely different environment. Previous to the computer, the techniques of the state, education, propaganda and various other techniques were separate and could not be coordinated. But now, they can be smoothly integrated into one smooth-running technical system through the information processing machine.

KATHARINE: Right And we need to analyze that, not moving away from our philosophy of what that is doing to people, how it is creating poverty. This would not say that there is no poverty or that the whole emphasis on the works of mercy would change, but in our analysis of where is the enslavement coming, where is the oppression. What's worse is that all of these things look good and they look like they're overcoming the oppression of the industrial era.

JEFF: It looks like they're liberating people, and people speak of... machines - satellite communications and information processing, as personalized, liberating machines.

KATHARINE: And I think what Ellul would say is that you really need to look at how precisely the poverty in Los Angeles, the poverty in New York, the people who come to our doors-how is this being shaped and formed, what is this doing to people.

JEFF: To me, that is exactly the power of the Catholic Worker—to be there with the poor, particularly the poor of the urban First World, the urban, technical world, to see how their lives have been completely destroyed. All cultural supports are gone. All traditional culture has been erased. You can see it much more clearly in the poor than you can in the wealthier classes, who are much more able to protect themselves against the disintegration, or at least to hide it.

The wealthy still operate on these traditional values and perspectives. But among the poorest of the poor you recognize the decimation of their lives by technology's destruction of traditional values. You realize the hypocrisy of American politicians, all politicians, who preach family values with one breath, and preach technological growth with the next, and don't recognize that the two are incompatible.

KATHARINE: And they don't recognize that this new formulation of the information society, or the technical society is depersonalizing. You can't use impersonal means to bring about a more personalist way of being.

Also, you can't be liberated from the power of money simply by spending more money. Peter said you go into voluntary poverty to end the enslavement to money. I'm not sure if "voluntary poverty" is the phrase that Ellul has used, but he would say if this society is defined, say, by massive consumerism and the prestige of money, that certainly should be questioned. If large-scale bureaucracies are the order of the day,

then we need small communities of personalist, non-bureaucratic ways of living our lives together.

JEFF: The whole issue of personalism. It seems when we go out and talk about it or when we write about it in our paper, I feel self-conscious almost because it seems like this quaint kind of perspective of the world, and what we really should be doing is having a massive revolution, or electing Jesse Jackson president or converting the editorial board of the L. A. Times. That this personalist perspective of person-to-person action, doing the works of mercy—that's a nice thing to do, and if you want to do it, that's fine, but those of us who are really going to make a difference in the world and bring social justice about, or bring in the Kingdom, we're going to work through these massive means to change the world.

I feel so much that Ellul gives me a way of looking critically at these technological means and saying no, they're not going to work, that's not going to bring about the kind of justice that you want. In fact, these technological means are doing exactly the opposite of what you think they're doing. Fortunately, or unfortunately, you have to work on this personal level.

KATHARINE: I think of the reasons why we sometimes espouse a philosophy of personalism that seems so quaint is that it can be seen that this world we live in is so overwhelming that we're going to retreat into a world of ones and twos. I'm going to look after my own personal well-being, I'm going to try to create this atmosphere where my person is affirmed.

But that certainly isn't what was meant by personalism, certainly not by Dorothy or Peter, in that it is a public response in the world. This isn't just getting a house and retreating into it because we have to have some other people living with us. But rather, this is a statement that people live together better in small personalist ways than through bureaucratic ways.

The Ted K Archive

Jeff Dietrich and Katherine Temple
Jacques Ellul and the Catholic Worker Movement
July 1991

The Ellul Forum, Issue #7

www.thetedkarchive.com