The Meaning of the Global City

Jacques Ellul's Continued Relevance to 21st-Century Urbanism

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Abstract

Jacques Ellul's book, The Meaning of the City, widely recognized as one of the most important twentieth century theological reflections on the city, was also one of his most controversial scholarly contributions. Many urbanists interpreted the book as demeaning the city and diminishing the importance of urban policy, planning, design, architecture, and activism at a time when cities around the world had experience profound crises. This article reexamines The Meaning of the City and its relevance to twenty-first century urbanism.

Keywords

Ellul, cities, globalization, planning, ethics

Introduction

Theologian and social theorist Jacques Ellul's best known and most renowned work was *The Technological Society* (1964). It is likely, though, that few readers understand the origins of *The Technological Society* in Ellul's observations of the 20th-century city. Consider this passage from the beginning of *The Technological Society*:

> Men now live in conditions that are less than human. Consider the concentration of our great cities, the slums, the lack of space, of air, of time, the gloomy streets and the sallow lights that confuse night and day. Think of our dehumanized factories, our unsatisfied senses, our working women, our estrangement from nature. Life in such an environment has no meaning. Consider our public transportation, in which man is less important than a parcel, our hospitals in which he is only a number. Yet we call this progress. . . . And the noise, that monster boring into us at every hour of the night without respite. The machine took its place in a social milieu that was not made for it, and for that reason created the inhuman society in which we live. (Ellul, 1964, pp. 4-5)

Ellul's reflections on the role of technique—including, but not limited to, machines of industry and convenience— were prompted in part by the living conditions of 20th-century cities. While Ellul interprets 20th-century urbanism in various locations in his corpus, his most direct contribution to urbanism was primarily made through his 1970 work, *The Meaning of the City*. This article explores the contribution, weaknesses, and continued relevance of that work in the context of 21st-century urbanism, which is marked by novel urban forms such as the global city, the megacity, and the megaslum. Of the major concerns of urbanism—the causes and consequences of the urban condition, the origins and implications of urban issues, and the presence and influence of the city in the world—Ellul was most concerned with the last, giving his work continued, and even increased, significance in a world now more urban than ever, a world in which the city's presence is truly global. Any exploration of this work, in particular, must

reckon with Ellul's approach to the integration of what he called urbanism and "the sciences," on one hand, and his Christian faith, on the other. There is not sufficient room here for complete exploration of Ellul's approach to the integration of faith and reason, so analysis will be limited to the text of *The Meaning of the City.*

The Meaning of the City: Context and Reception

The 20th century was the century of urbanization. When Ellul was born, 175 million people—approximately 10% of the world's population—lived in urban areas. By the time World War II was over, that percentage had nearly tripled; about 750 million people lived in cities. By 1970, just a quarter of a century later, that number had nearly doubled, swelling to almost 1.5 billion. In the course of only 70 years, the number of urbanites had grown by nearly an order of magnitude.

Not only had the number of city-dwellers grown but the size of cities had also increased dramatically. In 1900, London was the largest city in the world, with a population of 6.5 million, about the size of present-day Chennai, India. At that time, all of the world's 10 most populous cities were in Europe or North America, and none had more than 10 million inhabitants. By 1950, New York City had surpassed the 10 million mark, becoming the first megacity.

Urbanization had been on the rise since industrialization began in earnest in the late 1700s. Before the industrial era, cities grew because their walls provided security and their access to transportation routes provided opportunities for trade. Beginning with the industrial era, cities also grew because they concentrated capital and wage labor, providing unparalleled possibilities for economic growth. For this reason, they also concentrated hopeful but impoverished masses migrating from largely agricultural hinterlands. Some people moved to cities because of the pull of upward mobility. Others were displaced as their lands were "enclosed"—land previously inhabited and worked as common areas transitioned to private property as feudalism drew its final breaths—or because developments in agricultural technology put them out of work.

Common to industrial cities, whether of the north or the south, were Dickensian scenes of squalor and oppression. By the middle of the 20th century, the city had taken on a new role in public consciousness. The 1927 German expressionist film, *Metropolis*, captured this consciousness with a dystopian vision of oppressive labor conditions, tenement housing, class conflict, and political upheaval. The late 1960s made *Metropolis* (Lang, 1927) seem simultaneously prescient and understated, as cities across the globe were primary sites of class conflict, violent political unrest, and student-led protest movements.

Responses to the profound social changes accompanying urbanization were mixed, especially among urban planners and futurists. Some followed in the utopian tradition of Ebenezer Howard (1850-1928), who had envisioned "Garden Cities," settlements that would unite the best of the city and the best of the countryside (Howard, 1902).

Others, such as Charles-Edouard Jeanneret (1887-1965), better known as Le Corbusier, advocated planning and architecture as ambitious and mechanical as industrialism itself, noting that houses were simply machines for living (Le Corbusier, 1947). The contributions of planners were accompanied by the work of Jane Jacobs (1916-2006) and Lewis Mumford (1895-1990), regarded by many as the two greatest urbanists of the 20th century. Jacobs's *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961), a critique of modernist planners such as Le Corbusier and Robert Moses (1888-1981), found hope in the diversity and density of cities. Mumford, in his awardwinning book, *The City in History* (1961), argued that cities were doomed to death and destruction unless they began to organize themselves around the needs of human beings, rather than around the needs of machines. In fact, Mumford argued that the plight of cities was essentially a religious one. Cities had always been planned around places of worship—temples, for example—which had controlled the organization of space and activities in the urban landscapes. Mumford argued that worship still controlled the organization of cities, but that humans had begun to worship the machine, organizing human community around industrial and transportation practices that were neither humanly scaled nor environmentally benign. Instead of organizing cities to serve the idol of the machine, Mumford argued that humans should organize them in such a way as reflects worship of the human being, a truly human being who transcends all particularity—"One World Man." Only such religious devotion to humanism could change the city's trajectory toward destruction. These religious associations had become common to thinking about the city. In 1927, *Metropolis* included a famous scene in which oppressed workers whose drudgery is required to make urban life possible are sacrificed to the "Moloch machine." Nearly 30 years later, Alan Ginsberg, writing in New York City, published what became a famous poem, "Howl" (1956) the second part of which describes the urban industrial world as Moloch, a god demanding human sacrifice.

If even the secular debates about cities had taken on religious overtones, it should come as no surprise that theologians, too, were following closely the developments in urbanism and providing commentary that took the city seriously. The city was common as an object of inquiry in its own right and, just as with the pattern set by Augustine (2003), was also common as a trope or heuristic device. 1965 saw the publication of Harvey Cox's book, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective*, a challenge to the antiurban bias of much American Protestantism. The late 1960s also saw the publication of Francis Schaeffer's *Death in the City* (1969), a collection of lectures given just 5 months after race riots shook Chicago to its core in the wake of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Memphis, Tennessee. While "city," for Schaeffer, means more than just an urban area, the core of its argument is captured at the end of the first chapter: "Because man has turned from God, there are hungers on every side, there is death in the *polis, there is death in the city!*" (Schaeffer, 1969, p. 21).

It was in this context of demographic shift, social turmoil, and scholarly ambivalence that Jacques Ellul wrote his book, *The Meaning of the City*, published in 1970. Ellul

had realized the singular importance for the late 20th century of the city as a form of human settlement:

> We are in the city, and this is one of the most important facts of our generation. It is absolutely indispensable that we realize what this means for us, for our actual life: The undeniable presence and influence of the city are of infinitely greater importance than the urban problem in itself. (Ellul, 1970, p. 147).

This realization had begun much earlier, as Ellul (1967) considered the widespread origins and implications of technological society for human community and noted the rise of urban planning as a technique—the one best way to organize human settlements.

The Meaning of the City was one of the very few Ellul works published first in English. With this work, Ellul was speaking into the world of Cox, Jacobs, Mumford, and others, and doing it in their own language. The book was supposed to be the contribution of a world-famous public intellectual to a pressing matter. *The Technological Society* had already made a considerable impact and readers were prepared to hear Ellul's voice on one of the most pressing issues of the times.

As would be expected, *The Meaning of the City* was widely read and reviewed by scholars in multiple disciplines. Activist, legal scholar, and lay theologian, William Stringfellow received the book with praise, calling it "a book of startling significance" that should "rank beside Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society* as a work of truly momentous potential" (see Ellul, 1970, back cover). Cox (1971), writing in a Roman Catholic journal, *Commonweal*, commended the book to his readers, noting that "Jacques Ellul is neither a purblind Luddite nor a quaint religious fanatic. Though his theology has some serious thin spots and even some holes here and there, his instincts are usually dependable. He cannot be ignored" (p. 357). Despite a warm reception by some, it is fair to say that the book was widely condemned. Theologians and social scientists alike rejected what they took to be Ellul's methods and his conclusions. Theologian Gibson Winter (1972) wrote that Ellul "interpreted the city in the Bible through the 'heavenly Jerusalem' in a bald and unrelieved fashion," the result being "a starkly challenging and slightly repulsive picture of biblical thinking . . . true to neo-orthodox thinking, if not to biblical realities" (p. 118). In a review for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, sociologist Jeffrey Hadden—himself author of the influential book, *Metropolis in Crisis: Social and Political Perspectives*—characterized Ellul's work as a simple recitation of the antiurban sentiments of the biblical authors (1973). In statements characteristic of the wider reception of the book, both reviewers suggested that Ellul's approach justified at best "benign neglect" of lost and cursed cities by Christians preoccupied with the eschatological city. If, as Ellul argued, God would put all things right in the end and if, in the meantime, humans cannot fix things themselves, then why involve themselves in the city at all? Both Winter and Hadden believed Ellul to be excusing Christians from involvement in shaping the course of history and, specifically, from shaping the fate of the city. By supposedly proof-texting

antiurban sentiments in the Christian scriptures, Ellul was giving Christians an excuse to despise the city themselves.

To this date, the majority sentiment among urbanists seems to be that *The Meaning of the City* should have been titled, *Demeaning the City.* But did the one-time Deputy Mayor of Bordeaux really advocate leaving a lost and cursed city to rot, waiting quietly for the final work of the new creation? Or have commentators misinterpreted Ellul? Indeed, *The Meaning of the City* may be one of Ellul's most misunderstood works, owing largely to the fact that it occupies a distinctive place in Ellul's corpus as an ambitious argument that attempts to offer theologically based hope in response to despairing inquiries by social theorists.

Revelation and Reason in The Meaning of the City

While *The Meaning of the City* was written in the language of international urbanism, it was not written on the terms of international urbanism. That is, rather than take for granted the questions and methods of urbanism, *The Meaning of the City* was first and foremost a critique of those very questions and methods. When Ellul waded into this debate, it was not to affirm the questions and methods of urbanism while providing novel answers and marginal revisions. Rather, it was to say that urbanism, itself, fails to deal effectively and powerfully with the reality of the city and, therefore, to understand fully the presence and influence of the city in the world.

For Ellul, in order to understand the city, one should let the Christian scriptures set the agenda. He suggested that in order rightly to understand what urbanism and the "sciences" teach about the city, one should allow the Christian faith to interrogate and critique urbanism. Here it is worth quoting Ellul even at great length:

> Have the scriptures perchance taught us something decisive concerning the concrete situation in which we find ourselves? If so, all of the historical and sociological problems take a subordinate role. For if the word of God is truly marked out for us in the Scriptures and if it is truly spoken for us, taking hold of us in our concrete situation, and if at the same time as it takes hold of us (for our condemnation and salvation) it enlightens our understanding of that situation, and if we are truly involved in the city and the Bible shows us where we are in the city and what the city means for us and our relations with her, then all that we have learned should form the proper nucleus of a science of the city. Not of an objective and purely technical science of the city, but a science in which we would be involved as in a struggle for the truth. For the basic question is whether we can deal with a foreign and unalterable truth, whether we can conquer and possess it, or whether by launching into such a quest we become involved in it ourselves and responsible for it, responsible for what we will learn and what we will

> do with this truth. And since man knows no science but a concrete science, then by studying the city are we not working for a human science? And since man knows no science by a science built up according to a plan, then by seeking the spiritual nucleus of this problem are we not working for a human science? What is striking in modern research is that it just happens not to be built up around a plan; it is guided by the objects under study, follows every whim of its instruments, and is constantly led on by the successive discovery of new objects for study. It imposes no domination, and while it is praiseworthy in its humility, it is also vain in its incoherency. We do not believe that such an approach is necessary any more than is the idol of objectivity. And when we have revealed, as here, the spiritual nucleus of a problem, we admit (and this is also singularly humble) that it is in fact the nucleus of the problem, that every aspect radiates around it. If we accept this, then what we learn to know about the city by natural means, by history and sociology, and about man in the city by psychology and the novel, must be connected, coordinated, strongly knotted together, because of the spiritual nucleus. The result is that our natural sources are dependent on revelation. I know that this will be considered a betrayal to science, but it is either this method or else the sterility of death. How is it that our historians and sociologists have not been struck with the sterility of their work? Our work of tying the threads together will not be done explicitly, for we have already traced their pattern. Our entire purpose will be to come to a decision and to take our biblical information to its logical conclusions. (Ellul, 1970, pp. 147-148)

Note that the "human sciences" are nominally present in Ellul's account. While alone they are insufficient, properly subordinated to divine revelation, they aid in acting "in true service to society." For Ellul, God's supernatural act of making himself known serves to organize, interpret, and empower data gathered by natural means. Again,

> Certitude can be found only in the position that revelation forces us to adopt with regard to the spiritual being of the city and its role through history as concerns man. The reality of the city, not as an event, but as a structure of the world, can be understood only in the light of revelation. And this revelation provides us with both a means of understanding the problem and a synthesis of its aspects as found in the raw data of history and sociology. However, we must not expect perfect agreement, for the two realities are not on the same plane. Although I cannot mistake the sun for the colors of the spectrum, nevertheless, I could not know color but by the help of the sun. I could doubtlessly make a chemical analysis of the coloring agents, I could study all the physical or biological aspects of color, without ever having an inkling of living color, unless all these aspects are

> brought into play by the simple fact of light bringing out color. So it is with the reality of human problems in general and with our particular aspect of life. Revelation—which was not given with this in mind—enlightens, brings together, and explains what our reason and experience discover. Without revelation, all our reasoning is doubtlessly useful, but does not view reality in true perspective. So when we said that we had nothing new to offer history or sociology, we were correct, but not strictly. We have in fact furnished no direct contribution to these sciences, themselves; but what history and sociology tell us about the city is here confronted with revelation, is brought together and synthesized not as bare fact but as illuminated by another source of light. Ellul (1970, pp. 153-154).

Of all of Ellul's books, *The Meaning of the City* contains some of the most explicit statements of his agenda for relating revelation and reason. This meta-methodological issue is what lends the book to misunderstanding. It is not only an approach that is foreign to secular urbanism, but it jeopardizes the primacy of urbanism's questions and methods and offends many by its implicit exclusivity. These issues blind some readers even to what Ellul seems to say so very clearly, including his admission of the majesty of the city and human responsibility toward its social challenges.

So what, in fact, did Ellul find when he brought the resources of Christian scriptures and theology to bear upon the interpretation and organization of what the human sciences say about the city? Ellul's investigation led him to the conclusion that the city is the greatest achievement of human beings and the center of all other cultural achievements. According to Ellul, the arts flourish in the city. Government and law are developed in the city. Educational and other institutions are not only common to the city but also depend on it for their development.

At this point, one might wonder exactly what urbanists and others have found so offensive about Ellul's argument. The city is the greatest achievement of human beings and the key to all other accomplishments. How is Ellul demeaning the city?

Ellul's Approach to the Biblical Witness Regarding the City

Ellul's approach to Scripture is more or less organized around the categories of creation, redemption, and consummation. According to this rubric, he investigates the "reality of the city" as presented by the biblical data. His inquiry answers, either explicitly or implicitly, the following questions: "What does Scripture attest regarding the city as part of God's good creation?" "What does Scripture attest regarding the city after the fall and the curse, as a part of the created order in need of redemption?" "What does Scripture attest regarding the consummation of God's plans for the city, regarding the city in the new creation?"

The City in Need of Redemption

Readers familiar with the beginning of the book of Genesis will immediately see one of the challenges of this approach: There is no account of a city preceding the fall of humanity into sin and subsequent curse announced in Genesis 3. One cannot straightforwardly locate and describe what the biblical data have to say about the city and creation. One is left to speculate about the relationship between what can be known about the reality of the city and what Christian scripture and tradition suggest about prototypical human community. To consider the city and creation, one strategy might be to investigate the city as one expression of human sociality, which originates in the social order described by Genesis 1 and 2 and affirmed by God as "very good." In other words, one might recognize the city as one expression of human community and begin an investigation into its spiritual reality as described in Scripture by locating Scripture's first testimonies about human community before the Fall and curse.

Ellul, however, does not begin by recognizing the city as one expression of human community and relating it to the prototypical social order described in Genesis 1 and 2. For Ellul, the story of the city begins after the account of the fall and the curse with Gen 4:1–17: the story of Cain. Most people—even nonreligious—are familiar with the beginning of the story. According to the author of Genesis, following their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve had two children, Cain and Abel. Eventually, the brothers presented sacrifices to God. Abel brought a sheep, the firstborn from among his flock, which pleased God, while Cain brought part of his harvest, which displeased God. Angry and envious, Cain killed his brother. God called Cain to account for his brother's whereabouts: "Where is your brother Abel?" (Gen 4:9). Infamously, Cain replied that he did not know and asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:9). Even though Cain was not forthcoming, God knew what Cain had done and, as a punishment for Cain's deeds, God cursed Cain,

> What have you done? Listen! The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it will no longer yield its crops for you. You will be a restless wanderer on the earth. (Gen 4:10–12)

Cain protested

> My punishment is greater than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence; I will be a restless wanderer on the earth, and whoever finds me will kill me. (Gen 4:13–14)

Cain feared the wandering life, the insecurity of alienation not only from the land and from God but also from human community, which he had shattered through violence. Mercifully, God put a mark on Cain that was meant to protect him on

his journey, to provide him with the security he needs to endure his discipline with obedience. After wandering to the east, Cain settled in the land of Nod and built a city named after his son, Enoch (Gen 4:16–17).

For Ellul, this first scriptural reference to a city communicates the "spiritual reality" of all cities. "If this story is significant," he writes, ". . . it is because it gives us God's view of man, or rather God's view of certain attitudes and activities of man" (Ellul, 1970, p. 2). According to Ellul, the shape of this story suggests that construction of the first city was an act of rebellion against God. Until Cain murdered Abel, God's grace

> enabled life to go on, and this protection is seen in a certain stability, a certain familiarity between man and nature. He has introduced insecurity, the taste for blood, for vengeance. And the condemnation pronounced by God is only the inevitable result of Cain's act. Cain has broken the relationship between man and the world, and so he will necessarily be a fugitive and a wanderer. (Ellul, 1970, p. 2)

After his crime and curse, Cain had neither a home nor the security that a home provides. Though he received assurance through a sign of God's protection, "he would prefer a more obvious security, such as the one he destroyed by his crime—family security, a relationship with animals and things, a familiarity with men and places" (Ellul, 1970, p. 2). So Cain built a city. As Ellul (1970) writes,

> Cain is completely dissatisfied with the security granted to him by God, and so he searches out his own security. . . . As for his security, he will find another way to procure it. . . . He will take care of his own needs in these areas . . . The city for Cain is first of all the place where he can be himself—his homeland, the one settled spot in his wandering. Secondly, it is a material sign of his security. He is responsible for himself and for his life. He is far from the Lord's face, and so he will shift for himself. Cain sought security no so much from God, whom he was trying to escape, as from the world, hostile since Abel's murder. The world was perhaps difficult after Adam's Fall, but it was not yet marked by murder. Now it is. The city is the direct consequence of Cain's murderous act and of his refusal to accept God's protection. Cain has built a city. For God's Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself—just as he substituted his own security for God's. Such is the act by which Cain takes his destiny on his own shoulders, refusing the hand of God in his life. (pp. 4-5)

Enoch, the city, was a product of Cain's refusal to accept his discipline with obedience and to be a wanderer on the earth. Moreover, it was a product of Cain's refusal

to trust in the promises of a God who had given his special mark of protection. Cain should have wandered as God directed, trusting God's mark to preserve him in the face of death. Instead, he built a city in order to regain a sense of security conferred by stability and community, rather than by faith.

Ellul believed that the spiritual reality of every city was determined by Enoch's founding as a rejection of God's promise in favor of self-realization and self-expression. A rejection of spiritual promises of security and prosperity in favor of material signs of security and prosperity would characterize all cities from then on. According to Ellul, it is no wonder that Babel, Babylon, and Ninevah would be known for their rebellion.

The City and New Creation

It is easier now to see why Ellul's detractors believed that he maligned the city. While he believed it was the most significant human achievement—even the sine qua non of a host of other achievements—he believed that this achievement represented a fundamental rejection of God and God's promises. Self-expression and self-realization, for Ellul, are expressions of sinfulness, even when they issue in great achievements.

If this were as far as Ellul went, his urbanist critics might be justified. But Ellul's analysis does not end with what Scripture attests regarding the city after the Fall. Ellul continues to consider what Scripture attests concerning the intersection of the city and eschatological hope. His analysis in this vein begins with Jerusalem and ends with the New Jerusalem. Ellul (1970) writes of Jerusalem:

> Jerusalem is a holy city. But she is still a city. She carries man's mark, even in her election, even in her adoption by God. She never escapes from all the characteristics of the city, as is indicated by the accusations constantly aimed at her, aimed at the sins she never ceases falling into anew. Her sins are those of other cities; she acts like them and is condemned like them. (p. 97).

Jerusalem is a bloody and idolatrous city, and yet one covered by God's unfailing love and chosen for his special purposes (Ellul, 1970, pp. 97-100). As Timothy Gorringe (2002) notes, this tension is central to Ellul's argument concerning the city and does resemble in some ways the dialectic of secular urbanists such as Lewis Mumford and David Harvey.

Jerusalem represents the both the city's persistent distress and the city's eventual restoration. According to Ellul (1970), Jerusalem is consecrated unto God and "everything in the city of Jerusalem that still belongs to the world of the city, the creation and pride of man, is condemned to be only a devastated cemetery" (p. 101). The remnants of the old city remain. But God is present in this city, among these remnants, opening up new possibilities. God's presence in Jerusalem is a sign of both his adoption and his judgment. And it is a sign, Ellul writes, "to all the cities of the world" (1970,

p. 105). God promises to overcome the spiritual reality of the city: Because of God's promise to transform the city, *all cities* "are recipients of a marvelous destiny in Jesus Christ" (Ellul, 1970, p. 140). This eschatological consummation will be realized in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city of the Revelation of John.

Ethical Implications

But what did Ellul think that Christians should do in the meantime? How are they to behave in and toward cities that are still the creation and pride of man and yet are redeemed by the work of God? If the city stands under God's judgment, should Christians abandon it? If God has already accomplished his redemption of the city, and it only awaits its consummation, should Christians do nothing? The keys to understanding what Ellul believes one must do are the rubric of "miracle and martyrdom" and the contrast between "faithfulness and success."

Miracle and Martyrdom

For Ellul, Christians are called to the city in imitation of the ministry of Jesus Christ, whose work in Jerusalem represented both martyrdom and miracle. Christians are without question called to live and work in the city. In doing so, they represent the presence of God in the midst of the selfassertion, self-realization, and self-sufficiency of human beings—the body of Christ, as God's greatest accomplishment, in the midst of the greatest accomplishment of his rebellious creatures. Christian presence in the city should signify and symbolize what the heavenly city of God will be like and that it will be different from the city of man. For this betrayal of the city and the self-sufficiency that it symbolizes, Christians should expect rejection and suffering. In other words, they should expect to follow Jesus' footsteps into martyrdom.

If the city does not reject Christians, then this is, strictly speaking, miraculous. Like the resurrection and ascension, this is a *super*natural event that requires God's intervention. For people of faith in a God who performs miracles and rules over nature, this is perfectly conceivable, even if it is both unexpected and unlikely. For this reason, Christians should not prejudge whether faithful representation of God's judgment upon and adoption of the city, of the promised triumph of faith over self-assertion, self-realization, and self-sufficiency, will result in miracle or martyrdom. That is up to God. Christians are called to active engagement with the city, but cannot know whether the outcome will be martyrdom or miracle.

Faithfulness Versus Success

A corollary of Ellul's miracle/martyrdom rubric is the importance of faithfulness. For Ellul, Christians are called to faithfulness, rather than to success. The task of the

church is not to bring in the kingdom of God. As Ellul notes elsewhere, the kingdom of God marches toward the present reality; humans do not march toward it (1997, pp. 174, 179). While Christians await the coming kingdom, their task is to faithfully symbolize and signify what the kingdom of God is like. Their task is to do this in the city, in order to serve as signs of God's love:

> Not only do God's people in the midst of the city already serve as God's presence, but much more important, they serve also as the temporal election of the city itself, to accomplish God's work . . . and the promise made to the city. All this is to show that the condemnation of the city has not plunged her into morningless night. (Ellul, 1970, p. 90)

Faithfulness is to face the uncertainty of miracle or martyrdom with courage and hope, signifying these truths of God's love for the city and his work even if it appears that the city will not accept that testimony.

An overarching commitment to success compromises faithfulness. Such a prejudice is itself a commitment to the same sort of self-assertion, self-realization, and self-sufficiency that are at the heart of human rebellion against God. It involves the presumption that one knows perfectly what ought to be, that one should bring about those conditions no matter the cost. A commitment to faithfulness, on the other hand, is a commitment to symbolize and signify what the kingdom of God is like, whether or not it seems successful, even if it might lead to martyrdom. Faithfulness takes "failure" seriously as an option. Spectacular martyrdom signifies that the kingdom of God is different from and more important than human success. An overarching commitment to faithfulness, rather than to success, ensures that the people of God witness to his work in both success and failure, both miracle and martyrdom. Miraculous successes of Christian involvement in the city signify what the kingdom of God is like. If the people of God are faithful despite suffering and hardship, then spectacular failure and martyrdom testify that, unlike Cain, they will trust God and hope in his promised new creation rather than assert their self-sufficiency.

The Paradox of Ellul: Apocalyptic and Prophetic Urbanism

It is clear that many of Ellul's detractors were confused or unfair in their assertion that Ellul was excusing Christians from involvement in the city. No doubt this owes at least in part to Ellul's seemingly thoroughgoing rejection of human interventions that might improve urban life. In *The Meaning of the City*, Ellul not only asserted that supernatural intervention was necessary for the redemption of the city, but he asserted that natural means to urban revitalization would be futile. In response to plans such as Le Corbusier's idea to create

> great blocks of dwellings where people will meet one another as they did in the village, with everything (grocer, baker, butcher) included in the block so that people will get to know each other and a community will come into being,

Ellul (1962) wrote, "The result of Le Corbusier's creation was exactly the opposite of what had been planned; problems of loneliness and isolation in such blocks of dwellings proved to be much more tragic than in the normal and traditional city" (p. 420). Ellul's argument in *The Meaning of the City* appears to leave no room for the possibility that interventions in social institutions or the physical environment would bring about any significant change. In this way, he seems to marginalize the interventions of urban planners and others. Some readers interpret this as a rejection of the potential for interventions in social institutions and the physical environment to bring about important and positive moral formation. Yet even Ellul's response to Le Corbusier suggests the possibility for such interventions to make a positive contribution to human flourishing—the "normal and traditional city" is *better*, according to Ellul, than Le Corbusier's machines for living.

What Ellul chiefly intends is that no human intervention can change the *spiritual reality* of the city. Indeed, Ellul (1970) writes,

> There would be no reason for optimism even if the projects of the urbanists were launched and Le Corbusier's "House of Mankind" were built. In very little time, the city would become herself again. No change in the walls, no purification of the air or improvement in lighting, no mixture of greenery and cement could transform the city's spiritual being. (p. 158)

Ellul was no more sanguine about the humanist and modernist impulses at the heart of city planning:

> How ridiculous, how grotesque is bravado of naked little man—bravado filling every newspaper, every socialist doctrine, every Protestant journal, every belief in the rebirth of humanism. "I am, and there is none else," man shouts. "I will stop the whole mess, I will put it in order. It's not so bad as it seems. This [urban distress] is only the normal course of history, a change of civilizations. There is no reason to be afraid of these new developments. In a few decades we will be familiar with them. All we have to do is to adapt and not reject them . . . and we must expand our minds in order to dominate them. We'll handle it."[1] Poor little man. You failed to notice that you are not dealing with flesh and blood, but with Thrones, and Powers, and Dominations which are attacking you, grinding you under, dominating

[1] This quote reflects not only the spirit of urbanism in Ellul's day, but specifically mimics a passage from Lewis Mumford's *City in History*.

> you from every side, and that the Devil's last trick is to make you think that you can put order back into chaos, that you are going to get spiritually big enough to the control the world. (Ellul, 1970, p. 166)

In condemning the spiritual meaning of the city, Ellul appears to marginalize practical interventions in urban life and to overlook the possibility that interventions can make an important difference. He appears to overlook the possibility for good urban planning and policy to promote freedom and justice, for the built environment to "promote human virtue or destroy it" (Gorringe, 2002, p. l57).

Readers should note, however, that this reflects Ellul's tendency, in *The Meaning of the City*, toward the "apocalyptic" over the "prophetic," which leads him to emphasize what is common between human enterprises and how they differ from the Kingdom of God, and to marginalize the differences between human enterprises. In an effort to undermine *all* sources of false hope,[2] Ellul appears to elide truly important differences between ways of organizing human community. Yet this tendency belies a contravening tendency in the rest of Ellul's work or life. In other works, he clearly shows negative moral ecological impacts of developments in social institutions and the physical environment. For example, if in *The Technological Society*, some developments in human institutions and the built environment can stunt freedom and justice and undermine human virtue, then other developments would, in fact be better for everyone. It is also important to note Ellul's activism, public service in municipal government, and engagement with secular academia, all of which point to the promise of engagement and the differences between interventions in the built environment and social institutions. Indeed, Ellul argues that Christians should be actively engaged in urban planning, policy, and design, even while they should not be "building the city" in a spiritual sense (see, e.g., Ellul, 1970, pp. 72-78, pp. 177-182). And accounting for many of Ellul's other contributions to at the intersection of Christian life and social ethics, it is evident that Ellul does see important differences between human endeavors, which opens up the possibility of interpreting Ellul "prophetically" and not just "apocalyptically." While this "prophetic" position may have been overshadowed by Ellul's "apocalyptic" proclivities in *The Meaning of the City*, it is clearly evident when we take the wider view.

[2] In his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Ellul sums up Qohelet's message with the following quote from George Bernano: "In order to be prepared to hope in what does not deceive, we must first lose hope in *everything* that deceives" (Ellul, 1990, p. 47). Keith Johnson discerns this impulse in *The Meaning of the City* in his chapter on sin and depravity in the hit television show, *The Wire,* set in inner-city Baltimore. In his work, Johnson points out that *The Wire's* pessimistic posture toward all social institutions is consistent with a commitment to hope only in the one who does not deceive (Tran & Werntz, in press).

Ellul's Contribution and Continuing Importance

Clearly, there is much work to be done interpreting Ellul when the tensions in his own claims seem to carry him beyond the necessary implications of his dialectical approach. By noting this paradox, though, we may be empowered to better understand and interpret Ellul's contribution and continuing importance. Many of Ellul's insights into the city are as important today as they were in 1970— perhaps even more so. Sometime between 2005 and 2008, global population passed a watershed mark. For the first time in history, more than 50% of the world's population lived in cities. By 2030, some demographers predict, more than 65% of the world's population will live in cities. The impact of this demographic shift is likely, according to some scholars, to be as significant as when people first started to live in cities in large numbers (McNeill, 2007). Human settlement in larger and increasingly dense cities will have profound impacts on diversity, identity, and citizenship, culture, environment, and governance. Some cities are now regarded as "cosmopoli:" cities in which the whole world is represented. The diversity of such cities has important impacts on notions of identity and citizenship, who we think we are and to whom we have obligations. Shifting senses of identity and citizenship in increasingly diverse cities can result in cooperative pursuit of the common good or radicalization. What happens in large cities is also important to the shape of the global environment. For example, cities such as Shanghai actually affect the quality of the environment on the west coast of the United States, demonstrating their global reach.

This global reach also extends to matters of governance, as cities are increasingly influential as sites and actors in global political economy. Some cities are more or less directly articulated to global affairs through the disproportionate presence of advanced producer and financial services firms, which coordinate the activity of globally dispersed but socially concentrated capital, global NGOs, and global energy corporations. Of the world's 100 largest economies, including nation-states, firms, and cities, 40 are cities. Moreover, some cities are joining each other in transnational municipal networks specifically designed to affect the outcomes of global governance efforts. Indeed, Singapore, a nation-state with all of the benefits and advantages of the state system, recently joined the C40 Cities Climate Action Network, reinforcing the presence and influence of the city in the 21st century.

We live in an increasingly urban world—one in which the meaning of the city is an increasingly important matter for discernment and *The Meaning of the City* remains an important guide to that discernment. Ellul's work on technique and the city is relevant today to the approaches taken to novel urban forms, such as megalopolises and megaslums. Ellul's specific focus on the presence and influence of the city in the world, if not his focus on the city's spiritual meaning, is now widely echoed in the burgeoning literature on cities.

In 1970, Ellul wrote, "Whatever direction we envisage for the future of our civilization, it is only too correct to think of it as *the triumph of the city*" [italics added] (p.

158). In his 2011 book, *Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier*, Harvard economist Edward Glaeser argues that cities, "our species' greatest invention," have "triumphed." Demographic, political, economic, and cultural transitions currently under way all demonstrate a dramatic shift of our social center of gravity toward the urban. Glaeser expects a future "emerald green age of the city" in which the efficiencies of urban settlement make social and environmental challenges easier to confront in effective fashion. The city is and will be, according to Glaeser (2011), the source of the goods we hold to be most precious:

> . . . whether in London's ornate arcades or Rio's fractious favelas, whether in the high-rises of Hong Kong or the dusty workspaces of Dharavis, our culture, our prosperity, and our freedom are all ultimately gifts of people living, working, and thinking together—the ultimate triumph of the city. (p. 270)

For Glaeser, this triumph comes in the face of significant social and environmental challenges that attend to urban agglomerations all over the world. Despite these challenges and problems, the city provides us with unprecedented security, prosperity, and sustainability. This is a theme that pervades other texts as well. David Owen argues in *Green Metropolis* (2009) that, because people in cities have lower levels of environmental impact because they live smaller, live closer together, and drive less, cities are the solution to global environmental challenges. Cities are also key drivers of an increasingly global economy because they provide access to the world through infrastructure for global air travel, making them machines for competition and economic growth. Some argue that, under such conditions, all other values must be subordinated to the pursuit of globality, connectedness, and competition for the sake of security and prosperity (Kasarda & Lindsay, 2010).

More and more people are dependent on increasingly influential cities for our security and prosperity. In a world in which "urbanity," "cityness," and "globality" are often presented as the solutions to all problems and sometimes articulated as the summum bonum of human community, Ellul confronts us with questions about the sources and signs of our security and prosperity in the face of difficult challenges to our increasingly urban world. Will we, like Cain, spend ourselves "trying to find security, struggling against hostile forces, dominating men and nature, taking guarantees that are within his reach, guarantees that *appear* to him to be genuine, but which in fact protect him from nothing" (Ellul, 1970/2011, p. 3). What will be our response to the soteriological mythology of the city—the idea that through the city, itself, one will find salvation? What does it mean to engage with the city in such a way as reject these soteriological myths, but still promotes the common good? In *The Meaning of the City*, Ellul helps us take these questions seriously, even if we must search through the rest of his corpus and biography for a more complete approach to the social institutions and the built environments in which most people now live.

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