

21st Century Propaganda

Thoughts from an Ellulian Perspective

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* * *

Just as Jacques Ellul presented himself in many different guises to the public, so also there are many different ways to be "Ellulian" in the 21st Century. One could do the work of a sociologist, theologian, historian, political scientist, newspaper columnist, local activist, and in each case adopt recognizable patterns of thought and action that hearken back to Ellul's own work and thought. "Ellulians" are attracted to his thought for different reasons. For some of us it is the breadth and scope of his vision of the world, integrating science with religion, law with morality, teaching with social work, while always preserving a concern for the individual, caught up in so many modern systems with their dizzying demands on our daily lives, snuffing out our spontaneity in the process.

There is no one thing identifiable as "Ellulian" unless it is, paradoxically, a resistance to any form of cookie-cutter identity, including that of slavishly conforming one's activity to some supposed model of behaviour or thinking identified with Ellul.¹ He has certainly provided us inspiration for the new century, and many of the problems he observed in his own time and predicted for the future are with us now, some of them more urgently than ever before. There are many different perceptions as to how one might be "Ellulian," but it would be a great mistake to think that one could reasonably regard oneself as "Ellulian" simply because one agrees with his diagnosis of what is wrong with the modern world. There is the further question of how to act, about which he had very definite things to say.

Take for example the case of Ted Kaczynski, the so-called "Unabomber," who killed people by letter bombs starting in 1978. Unquestionably, he echoed some of the ideas of Ellul concerning the technological society and he specifically mentions having read

¹ The paradox I refer to has been commented on many times, recently by Frederic Rognon, "Jacques Ellul: Une pensee en dialogue," (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2007) 19.

The Technological Society.² Had Kaczynski also read Ellul's *Violence*, he would have seen how, despite a large measure of agreement about how the technological imperative has shaped our modern consciousness and turned us into willing slaves, sending letter bombs to kill or maim those taking part in that imperative was not an appropriate response.³ The main and simple reason is the Christian premise underlying all of Ellul's thought. But there was also Ellul the sociological and political analyst, who saw that such acts, far from damaging the technological system, only strengthen its worst aspects. Just as with the events of 9/11, the result is to induce fear and create support for new security initiatives, new technological devices to further reduce the scope of human freedom.

So we have one very clear idea of how *not* to be Ellulian in the 21st C. Kaczynski, though a brilliant mathematician, appears to have been short on sociological and moral perception. His killings were supposed to awaken a public consciousness that would turn against modernity and view favourably his own back-to-nature vision of how to live. But his actions showed little empathy for his victims, suggesting a defective moral awareness, and his aim of transforming society was not achieved. To the extent he thought his actions would succeed he demonstrated inadequate sociological understanding.

To be a true Ellulian, then, requires not just an understanding of his diagnosis of what is wrong with the world. It also demands at least a minimal respect for the constraints he places on morally acceptable action. Based on the teachings in *On Violence*, there is no justification for killing people as Kaczynski did. Where is the love shown to the victims of Kaczynski's bombings?

Whether one chooses to identify with institutionalized religion or not, the message of love, so central to Christianity, is essential to the message that Ellul has tried to impart, both through his writings and the example of his civic engagements. To be an Ellulian means to involve oneself in social action in a way appropriate to one's abilities, guided by a realistic assessment of the problems of one's time and the likely chances of succeeding with this or that well thought-out response. But this has to be combined with a love even for the perpetrators of the evils one sees around us. The American cartoonist Walt Kelly famously had one of his Pogo characters say "we have met the enemy and he is us," and it is true that in the course of raising a battle-cry against the perceived social villains of our time we may be contributing to the very evils that we see around us. We may decry the producers of waste products and climate warming gases, but if our habit-formed needs provide a market for such services we share the blame.

My own interest is primarily in Ellul's insights into the phenomenon of propaganda, and I will pursue here three themes. The first is how propaganda in the 21st Century

² From *The Atlantic online*, June, 2000: "After he graduated from Harvard, Kaczynski encountered a book by the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (1954) ..." Kaczynski recalled: "Here is someone who is saying what I have already been thinking."

³ Perhaps he did read "Violence" but disagreed with it. I have no knowledge, one way or the other.

shows few signs of slackening in kind or quantity compared with the previous century. The second is that despite all the tools available for combating corporate and political propaganda there is evidence of age-old human weaknesses working against the successful use of these tools for bringing about a better and more just world. The third is a question: how should a conscientious person act to counter harmful propaganda? Is it sufficient to educate people, to let them know about the forms of manipulation so they can resist their influence? What are some of the pitfalls that prevent or undermine effective social action?

I

The word “propaganda” needs first to be defined. I use the term here in somewhat negative sense to refer to communications by an organized group designed to influence the thought, actions and attitudes of others in ways that suppress or bypass their ability to view what is conveyed from an adequately critical, rational standpoint. As a matter of usage, the word “propaganda” has a neutral as well as the somewhat pejorative meaning in the definition I have just given. In the neutral sense one simply talks about propaganda as getting messages across and influencing the public with nothing to suggest any kind of deception. But the word has come to take on sinister connotations, and I want to provide a definition that accounts for the negative perception of the word. Ellul captured an important strand of negativity by linking the word to communications aimed at gaining or maintaining power over others. This definition has its own valuable insights, but I want to emphasize the aspect of dupery as distinct from control, even though the two may go hand in hand.

The use of propaganda is no less evident in today’s world than it was in the last century. Governments and corporations have numerous advisers to help with marketing of products and policies. The electoral appeal of a political candidate, party or policy is measured carefully by widespread use of polling techniques. All that Ellul noted in the way of government by imagery is no less true today. Currently in Canada there is outrage over the use of “robocalling” (automated telephone messages) to influence and in some cases suppress votes for given candidates on election day. Voter suppression works by determining which voters are likely to vote for a rival party, and then pretending to be calling from the rival party’s headquarters with an insulting and annoying message, perhaps deliberately waking up the targeted person at night. It is a way of disaffecting such voters and getting them to decide not to vote for that rival party and perhaps not to vote at all. Another tactic is to pretend to be an elections officer informing all voters in a given area that the polling station has changed its location.

Analogous techniques were used to get Richard Nixon elected in the previous century, as Republican “dirty tricks” operatives such as Donald Segretti would discredit rival candidate Edward Muskie by sending out slanderous messages purporting to come from his office, so that he was viewed as the author of the slanders.

In today's world the computer-assisted knowledge about people's tastes and proclivities, derived from search engines and robotic recording of the sites visited through the use of a given computer allow for sophisticated profiling where a person and a given computer can be matched. Use of Facebook, Twitter and the like provide those with the appropriate technical knowledge the opportunity to build profiles of individuals that can be used for targeting them with messages designed to appeal to their profile for commercial or political purposes.

In 1980 Ellul lectured about the coming recording of human deeds and misdeeds in a way that would never be effaced, and how this might affect human behaviour. He saw a time coming when "happy forgetfulness" would be a thing of the past. Today already some Facebook users have reason to worry about how some earlier indiscretions, recorded for amusement among friends, might be used by hostile groups to discredit them later should they seek political office. Politicians have had reason to regret some of their Twitter messages that later became public. Hostile propaganda can be expected to seize upon anything that will discredit individuals seen as a threat to powerful interests. Eventually the effect of such propaganda will be to reduce our ability to communicate spontaneously with our friends, especially so as the post 9/11 mood has allowed governments to practice unprecedented surveillance on ordinary citizens.

Not only governments, but unscrupulous private hacking of telephones and computers has given media owners great power to destroy the reputations of politicians or other individuals when they see it as in their interest to do so. The unfolding saga of Rupert Murdoch's power through his huge worldwide media holdings is providing insight into this, as the scandals associated with *News of the World* have come to light and an embarrassed Murdoch directed the paper to cease to exist.

There are other areas where age-old propaganda techniques reappear in a way adapted to the latest technology in the current century. Product placement, the practice of including products in a movie or television production so that viewers will unconsciously link the product to the setting, and presumably become favourably disposed to it, is widespread in North America today. The practice of government or corporations making videos that have the appearance of independently produced news reports but are actually tilted to favour the government department or corporation in question is another example of a surreptitious way of influencing the public. The Tea Party movement in the United States, very conservative-libertarian, may have the appearance of a spontaneous, grass-roots movement, but behind it is funding by the Koch brothers, David and Charles, who have energy and other interests that they would like to see protected from adverse government regulation or taxation. The general practice of using other organizations as a front for one's own interests began already in the 19th Century, but as the public relations industry has grown and prospered, so has the practice of disguising sources of information and persuasion.

The flip side of positive propaganda is the negative one of curtailing information that might adversely affect a corporation's fortunes or a governments ability to rule in ways that it sees fit. Currently in Canada the federal Conservative government

led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper has clamped down on access of journalists to government scientists - so much so that recently it came to light that “minders” would be assigned to them when they attended conferences and the like where they might be interviewed by media. One may recall how during the Cold War I.F. Stone thwarted government attempts to persuade the U.S. public that a test ban treaty with the USSR couldn’t work because too many listening posts would be required to detect an underground test. Stone interviewed a government seismologist who showed how one such test was in fact picked up by their own listening posts at over a thousand miles distance, completely discrediting the official story.

The force and techniques of propaganda are still around and evidently increasing since the last century, as many other examples could show. But so also are techniques for combating this propaganda. The question, to which we now turn, is whether the latter can and will be effectively employed. Once again, Ellul has some sobering thoughts to bear upon his question.

II

In the 20th C. much effort was expended among progressive groups to counter the trend toward monopoly or oligopoly of the major news media. These efforts largely failed and Rupert Murdoch has gained enormous influence in Britain and the United States with ownership of the high-end *Times* of London and the *Wall Street Journal*, as well as the low-brow but mass appeal media that include the *Sun* and the *News of the World* in Britain and Fox News in the U.S.

The arrival of the Internet has given a widespread opportunity for voices dissenting from mainstream media to be heard. Some impressive work has been done on sites like Truthout, Alternet, Consortium News, TomDispatch and by individual bloggers to counteract the pictures of reality supplied by the dominant media. As an example, one regularly sees in the mainstream press discussion of a pre-emptive Israeli attack on Iran, without serious questioning of the assumption that Iran is seeking to build a nuclear bomb. The assumption deserves to be questioned, as the International Atomic Energy Agency report of

November, 2011, stops well short of such a conclusion. The translation or mistranslation of one of Ahmadjinedad’s statements, that Israel was destined to be “wiped off the map,” is likewise misleading in sounding like a call to arms rather than a prediction of what fate has in store.

The hold of the major media on younger people of university age has decreased over the decades, as social media take up more of their attention. The power of independent communication methods made itself felt with the Occupy Wall Street movement that began in September 2011. Major media ignored the movement until sheer numbers and police arrests forced them to cover the actions. Protests were directed against an array of injustices, among them a system where banks and the investment community

can get bailouts when they are financially over-extended as a result of gambling with fancy packages of mixed risk mortgage-backed securities. Ordinary investors were misled about the degree of risk, and pension funds suffered losses, whereas the financial industry in some cases profited from the collapse of poisonous mortgage securities by engaging in bets against them through a device known as “credit default swaps.”

The problem, well recognized by Ellul, is in sustaining people’s attention. The injustices of the financial system have been described but as Ellul noted in *The Political Illusion* the pure fact has no power on its own. It has to be “elaborated with symbols before it can emerge and be recognized as public opinion.” As Ellul observed “Only propaganda can make a fact arouse public opinion, only propaganda can force the crowd’s wandering attention to stop and become fixed on some event...”⁴

Back in 1980, Ellul drew attention in his IEP lectures to the difficulty of sustaining the momentum of environmental concerns. As he pointed out public opinion comes and goes in waves, like fashion, and the petroleum shortage scare in the early 1970’s did not prevent the arrival of gas-guzzling SUV’s in the 1980s and 1990s.

It seems then that Ellul’s diagnosis and prognosis of social action to bring about a more just and sustainable society has to involve the kind of image-making and duplicity that those who profit from socially dysfunctional activities engage in. This conclusion is unwelcome, because it suggests an end-justifying-the-means approach that is ethically unsatisfactory. Several things need to be said about this:

1. Not all image-making is unacceptably and misleadingly simplistic. The Occupy movement’s attention to the apparently different rules for the 1% as against the 99% is an effective attention retainer that has a reasonable basis in reality.
2. Abandonment of the high ground in the unequal battle by seekers of justice against exploiters is tactically inadvisable, because the privileged class will seize upon any moral deviousness and compromises to discredit the reformers. Sure, they may be much more devious themselves but who will tell the people about this? You may reach a few with your message, but your opponents will reach many more. The example of Julian Assange has shown how the messages of the WikiLeaks that he created can be drowned out in the media by attention to his own reported improprieties or worse in his private life. The ability of the dominant powers to repackage imagery of a given kind in ways that have an opposite impact should not be underestimated. The WikiLeaks revelations allegedly made by PFC Bradley Manning, dealing with U.S. actions in Iraq and Afghanistan gave viewers a glimpse of the sordid side of such actions, as video footage (later dubbed “Collateral Murder”) from an Apache helicopter showed the shooting and killing of civilians, including news reporters, a woman and two

⁴ Jacques Ellul, *The Political Illusion*, (New York: Random House Vintage Edition V-812, 1972), 184.

children, one of whom was to survive. The WikiLeaks commentary accompanying the sequence has been faulted on the ground that it did not give adequate attention to background context and to an exchange of gunfire that had taken place earlier and not far from the shown shootings. In this way the footage can be claimed, with some justification, to be propaganda (in not telling the full story). WikiLeaks has also been blamed for revealing the names of people working in secret to bring democracy in Zimbabwe, thereby putting their lives at risk and setting back the chances for democracy in that country. Manning and anyone following in his footsteps has then to face the branding of himself as a traitor to his country. Curiously, the public appears able to accept Daniel Ellsberg as a hero for leaking the Pentagon Papers revealing the deceptions about the prospects for victory in Vietnam, whereas that possibility for Manning and his similar revelations about Afghanistan and Iraq seems to have been thoroughly suppressed in mainstream media discussions.

3. There are alternative, clearly ethical strategies for combating unethical propaganda. One of these is education. Informing young people especially about the different ways in which people are duped and enslaved by the well-developed techniques of propaganda is an important step towards liberation. Propaganda unmasked is to a large extent propaganda that has been neutralized. A lot can be accomplished through education, but the educators will have to be alive to the latest techniques and strategies employed by the propagandists, and this will involve time and effort.

Another ethical strategy is the formation of educational groups. One person is less effective than a group at analyzing propaganda and communicating the results to wide audiences. Jacques Ellul and Bernard Charbonneau are good role models for this kind of organization as well as for their teachings and writings. The opportunities in today's world for communication through social media are enormous, and a perceptible change has taken place in the information and propaganda environment as a result. What the mainstream media may choose to ignore can be archived and re-accessed on one of the alternative Web sites.

But as people enter into a world of mass communication through their own networks it is important for them to learn some principles of ethical communication if their influence is to have lasting value. Ellul has very interesting things to say about this, couched in the language of what a good Christian should do, but non-believers should have little difficulty in adapting his insights to fit their own religious faith or lack of such.

III

Some remarks Ellul makes in *False Presence of the Kingdom*⁵ are interesting for their bearing on ethics in propaganda wars. A central principle of persuasive rhetoric is to provide a credible source in support of one's claims. For this reason it has become fairly common practice for pharmaceutical companies, to take one example, to seek some reputable scientist sign his or her name to a scientific study endorsing a new drug, even though the scientist may have had minimal involvement in the study. Hence the rather scandalous reference to "author to be determined" in the case of some studies.⁶ Naturally, anyone who can plausibly show that God endorses some plan or policy will have a lot of persuasive power among believers in God. Yet Ellul emphatically denounces the practice of bringing religion into politics in this way.

There are too many ways in which reasonable and good people can differ in their judgments about the best principles or policies to apply in governing a country. To present religion in a way that makes it seem to provide unequivocal support for one and only one of a contested set of political choices would be to falsify religion. As Ellul remarks, "The Church, and Christians generally, have clearly no competence in economic and political problems properly so called."⁷ The strategic move of enlisting Church authority may achieve some success at gaining followers for a cause, but it mixes up the proper roles of both religion and politics when this is done. Policies are disputable, but a commitment to the basic premises of a given faith is all or nothing. The effect of treating politics as one would religion is to demonize those with whom one disagrees. This prevents proper dialogue from taking place. How do you reason with the devil? Similarly, treating religion as one would politics turns the religious so-called commitment into something less than full commitment. It is of course important to have a dialogue about religion as well. But it is not the kind of thing that lends itself to continual reassessment in the light of changing fortunes, as we may infer from the case of Job.

A central passage where Ellul sets out his teaching on Christian duty in connection with the use of agitative propaganda for advancing a cause is the following:

The appeal to public opinion looks like a good tactic. As a matter of fact, it always results in the frightful entangling of political situations, for when public opinion is aroused by means which are nothing more than propaganda it is no longer capable of rendering political judgment. All it can do is follow the leaders.⁸

It is normal, he writes, for those who see the "struggle of interests and classes not only as a fact but as something to be desired, as something favourable, as an instrument

⁵ Jacques Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, trans. C. Edward Hopkin (New York: The Seabury Press, 1972).

⁶ A Carleton University philosophy colleague, Rebecca Kukla, brought this issue to my attention in her 2007 Marston LaFrance lecture at Carleton.

⁷ Ellul, *False Presence of the Kingdom*, 184.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 194.

of war” to want to stir up public opinion. But “for those who are exercising on earth the ministry of reconciliation [this tactic] is inadmissible.”⁹

These are strong words, telling the Christian that propagandistic methods to advance a cause about which he or she may be passionate are not permissible. Ellul realizes that by denying his Christian audience the path of propaganda he will be interpreted as a defender of the status quo. His defence against such a charge is that there are other avenues for bringing about liberating political changes, or as he puts it “another mode of entry for Christians.” Here it is important to recall the context of his writing, which was in the immediate aftermath of the bloody Algerian war of independence, in 1963. The passions set in motion by unrestrained propaganda by the different factions supporting or opposing French domination there became an obstacle to finding a solution with hope of a lasting peace. In that light the passion of his following statement becomes understandable: “That is where we should apply *all* the thought, all the charity, all the creativity, all the insight of which Christians are capable.”¹⁰

As I understand Ellul, he is not saying that the Christian should eschew effective rhetoric for awakening public opinion to injustices. On the contrary, it is important to speak out against trends that may have disastrous outcomes, to warn people when they ignore dangerous looming threats to future wellbeing. All of this is a matter of enlightenment. The problem comes at the point where the public has become engaged and passions are taking over on a given issue. At that point the role of the Christian (and, I would say, decent people whether or not they happen to embrace the Christian faith) should be to preserve the openness and respect toward those one judges to be “the enemy” on a given social issue, with a view to ensuring that a full dialogue is preserved and an opponent’s position is not misconstrued.¹¹

The foregoing remarks are of a general nature, and it will be helpful to illustrate some of the problems of engaging in ethical persuasion, as against unethical propaganda, with reference to a particular example. I choose that of bottled water, a matter of considerable environmental concern, because of the difficulties posed by empty plastic bottles accumulating in landfill, producing chemicals than can leach into and contaminate a water supply. There are also costs of collection, transportation, and in the case of recycling the costs of transforming the plastic into the same or some other usable product. While there may well be occasions for legitimate need for bottled water, in most industrialized countries the water can be more efficiently delivered, and in a more environmentally friendly way, by a system of pipes from water source to treatment centre and from there to homes, schools, office buildings, etc.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 194-5.

¹¹ The 19th Century cleric and philosopher Richard Whately had similar views about the ethical conduct of controversial discourse. I describe his ideas in *Propaganda and the Ethics of Persuasion*, (Peterborough: Broadview, 2002), 164 ff.

With this very brief background, I want to turn to a recent exchange in a magazine and widely circulating newspaper in Canada in which the Roman Catholic faith and its post-2007 teachings were brought into play in controversy regarding the purchase of bottled water. It started with the perception by a philosophy professor at a British Columbia Catholic college that those opposed to the use of bottled water provided by private companies for profit were demonizing those who make and consume these products, and that this was not appropriate charitable behaviour for a Christian. Treating water consumption from plastic bottles as heinous and sinful as distinct from an unsound ecological choice was excessive, in his view. This seems like a good Ellulian move, but he took the further step of making some tendentious interpretations (to my mind, at least) of a passage in scripture to support his case. His argument was picked up by an executive in a water bottling company, Nestle Waters, in Toronto, where attempts were being made to ban bottled water from Catholic schools. He used those arguments in a letter to the Toronto *Globe and Mail* with the evident intention of promoting a more favourable view of his company's products. I then reacted to what I saw as propaganda supporting an environmentally unsound activity and had my own letter published the next day. This led to a direct response by the executive to me, in a letter delivered by snail mail, with a copy sent to the publisher of the *Globe and Mail*. I responded by e-mail to the executive and the newspaper publisher, citing information about the harms of plastic bottles in landfill, costs of recycling etc. The executive has promised information about how recycling in Canada is superior to that in other places, and I await that information before saying anything more about the substantial, underlying issue.

I use the example to illustrate Ellul's point that while strong moral suasion might be important and justifiable in a case such as this, the enlisting of the religious language of sin to demonize opponents crosses a line that should not be crossed as long as the issue is sufficiently confused in people's minds that they are unsure about the facts and rightly see their individual action as affecting the public good only in a very minor way. Quite apart from the matter of charity and simply from a practical point of view, one is likely to be a more effective persuader if one treats an opponent as a good, decent person who happens to be informationally challenged on a particular issue than if one treats the person as evil and sinful.

The passage from scripture that the professor, C.S. Morrissey, chose to cite was about Jesus accepting water from a Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (Jn. 4-5, 15). He was breaking a Jewish taboo in doing this but in Morrissey's view if Jesus's request has any political implication, "it would be that Jesus respects private property."¹² In the same way that Jesus broke the taboo of his time, Morrissey says, "we should not endorse the bottled-water crusaders' misguided notion that to drink from a corporate

¹² C.S. Morrissey, "Confusing economic ideology and the Church's social witness," *B.C. Catholic*, December 11, 2010.

bottle makes us despicable and ritually impure.” As a check on the tendency of people to condemn others, this seems to me defensible.

But to quote Morrissey’s remarks, as did John B. Challinor, Director of Corporate Affairs for Nestle Waters Canada, in the context of a policy decision by a local school board seems to me to go beyond the meaning and intention of those remarks.¹³ He quoted Morrissey as referring to how the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church said that the provision of water may be justly “entrusted to the private sector.” That says nothing about the specifics of bottled water delivery and the selective presentation of this one fact gives the impression that Church teaching is on Nestle’s side, when a full appreciation of the ecological facts might well lead to the opposite conclusion.

Looking at this situation, and wanting to put readers straight on the matter of this distortion, what is an Ellulian to do? I believe Ellul himself was sufficiently concerned about the limited space and energy on our planet to want to encourage measures that would preserve and conserve our land for productive use, reduce air and water pollution, etc. So much so that, while combating religious zealotry on a policy matter such as anti-bottling, he might otherwise have favoured strong habit-cultivating measures such as the Toronto School Board was considering. For those who want to learn more about the specifics of this issue some information published in the *San Francisco Chronicle* should be interesting and useful.¹⁴

The lessons I want to draw from this exchange are the following. First, in today’s highly propagandized environment, knowledgeable people may need to be careful how they argue, because their remarks may be seized upon by special interest groups to promote business or political activities that their arguments were not intended to promote.

Secondly, before challenging the spokesperson for a major corporation make sure that you don’t misstate any facts or make false claims, because any such mistake will be seized on and your credibility will be destroyed. Fortunately, the Internet has provided the huge service of making a super-abundance of factual material available. How long this will last, I don’t know, but while the Internet is as it is the ordinary citizen finally has an effective way of countering propaganda of many different kinds and from many different sources.

¹³ John Challinor, “Water into wine,” letter, *The Globe and Mail*, April 20, 2012. See also: Randal Marlin, “Bottled Sin,” *The Globe and Mail*, April 21, 2012.

In response, John Challinor II sent a letter by regular post to Professor Randal Marlin, April 23, 2012, received April 30, 2012.

¹⁴ Jared Blumenfeld & Susan Leal, “The Real Cost of Bottled Water,” *The San Francisco Chronicle*, February 18, 2007.

<http://www.commondreams.org/views07/0218-05.htm>

See also Ecology Center, Berkeley, “Seven Misconceptions about Plastic and Plastic Recycling.” Downloaded May 2, 2012. Available at: <http://www.ecologycenter.org/ptf/misconceptions.html>.

Thirdly, do not overstate the religious dimensions of a given issue. I believe that a good Christian should have as an ideal that of promoting the common good, and it does make sense to encourage others to make less use of plastic bottles, but turning users into subjects fit for ostracism strikes me as at odds with Christian charity and excessive. As in so many things the best approach is to create awareness of the facts pertaining to such use. Kierkegaard was very clear about this. You don't engage in effective persuasion by telling another person that they sin when they drink bottled water. Much better to talk about so-and-so who discovered certain environmental costs to bottled water and who as a result reduced his or her consumption of it.

Behind all this trend toward bottled water consumption is the propensity of propagandees to be mesmerized by brand names, like Nestle, that have become so much a part of their lives. The myth of progress colours their thinking to the point where they feel that somehow, science will find a solution to landfill problems, to pollution and contamination problems. Bottled water is indeed a convenience, so that there is a desire among users to believe that no harm is caused from its use, and statistics about recycling efforts give a further sense that science is solving whatever problems bottled water caused some time in the past or in some other country. Ellul knew all about the myths and preconceptions favouring the propagandee's acceptance of consumption practices that run counter to the public good. His views are helpful for counteracting propaganda in the 21st century no less, and possibly more than, the previous century.

I've chosen this example because provides an illustration of some of the pitfalls of engaging in public controversy on a matter where propaganda plays a role. Some of the lessons can usefully be applied to other issues of even greater moment, such as those of war and peace in the Middle East, injustices in Israel-Palestine relations, etc. Here Ellul may be right to see the more fundamental question as one of the ability to avoid demonizing opponents as a way of coming to a measure of understanding and empathy, and from there to possible solutions. It helps, to do this, to reflect on how we would react to someone else demonizing us when we happen merely to lack some vital bit of information on an issue.

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