

Response by Jacques Ellul

to the November 1993 Conference on
"Technique and Society in the Work of Jacques Ellul"

On 12–13 November 1993, the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Bordeaux, France, hosted a conference on "Technique and Society in the Work of Jacques Ellul," the first such conference devoted to his thought. Ellul responded to the conference in its closing session. The text of his response first appeared in the July 1994 issue of the *Ellul Forum*, published by the University of South Florida, and is reprinted with the permission of Darrell J. Fasching, editor of the *Ellul Forum* and author of *The Thought of Jacques Ellul* (1981).

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear friends:

Doubtless I need to say first that I am full of gratitude toward the organizers of this colloquium and toward those who worked so hard to make it possible; and I have to say that I am surprised whenever such signs of esteem and honor are conveyed to me. I never felt I was creating an important body of work. I have always imagined myself the way Bossuet did: *Bos suetus aratro*, "the ox takes to the plow." Beyond any play on words, at least this much is true: I lived like the ox, worried only to plow a straight furrow. Although finally guided by others (without invoking He who "in the end" guides the plow) I want on the human level, in any case, to mention all those without whose help I would not have achieved anything, that is, my friends. I am a man of friendship. And without them I would not have known what to do. They have oriented me on every one of my paths.

I have to mention Bernard Charbonneau, of whom I can say that he taught me how to "think." But he also taught me to see the reality of society, instead of looking only into my books. He taught me to consider actively the social fact, "what is really happening"—to analyze, to criticize, to understand it.

In addition, there was the witness to Christian faith of Jacques Bosc. Not that I was converted to Christian faith by his testimony, but after my conversion he showed me what the Christian intellectual can be and taught me the meaning of theology.

Finally, I want to mention my friend, Henri Pouyanne, who made me leave the intellectual sphere in order to grasp the importance of life, for each of us, and who made me grasp that each life is essential, so that I had to be close to each "neighbor" with humility! My formation thus sketched, my task was to plow a straight furrow as straight as possible—nothing more.

I had to plow a part of the political or social world, perhaps in order to make room for ways other than the traditional ones in the world in which I lived.

This is how I worked, without genius but with perseverance, without a transcending inspiration but out of the conviction that my task was to unveil the realities to that man and of that time, which nobody seemed to take into account and which appeared to me to be decisive.

These diverse orientations explain as well why my work was located in two domains, which led to the two domains of my books—sociology and theology.

What is their relation?

First a scrupulous distinction: I have always tried to prevent "my" theology from influencing my sociological research (Calvinism) and my comprehension of the world from distorting my reading of the Bible. These were two domains, two methods, two distinct interests. Only after the separation, one begins to perceive relationship.

First, the evangelical proclamation is addressed to this individual human being, living in this society, not to some unimportant whoever—a "targeted" message. But also it is an expression of respect for the other and for the message. It follows that the key element is this: the sociological state of the world in which we live is rather desperate, so that it is difficult for modern people, deprived of hope and given over to immediate pleasure and unconscious fear of tomorrow, to proclaim the hope of faith in Christ and in the possibility for true love.

This is one major purpose that has oriented my whole life.

Thus I accomplished my task without excessively doubting myself and without participating in the vanity of success, a game of honors and of fashions! Some considered arrogance, others disdain, what was really a form of indifference toward all questions of success.

With or without success, I had to do a certain work—I just had to do what I had to do, and I did it. That is all there was to it.

I nevertheless had a point of reference and did not proceed in a haphazard manner. The straightness of this furrow consisted in two imperatives (which, incidentally, may appear contradictory). One was the foundation derived from Christian faith, from revelation, received and mediated in the Bible. This does not need further explanation.

Then there was the value derived from my father and realized through a rigorous education, that is, honor. For him, an agnostic honor was the code of his whole life. But does one still know what that is?

Honor, this *passé* aspiration I was raised with, included four rules: never lie to others, never lie to yourself, be merciful toward the weak, and never yield to the mighty.

As a result, I had to "navigate" between Christian revelation and these four imperatives.

It was within this framework and according to these orientations that my work proceeded. After all, "I could not do otherwise." You see that my personal contribution is weak and that the homage paid to me must be passed on to my friends and to my parents. I was nothing more than the bond that connected the elements, and that is precisely why I receive with gratitude for all of them what you said and achieved today.

With sincere gratitude and recognition, thank you.

—Jacques Ellul

(Translated by Achim Koddermann
and Carl Mitcham.)

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