

1 Introduction

Technology has been a liberating force, which has for millions of people increased standards of living and longevity. Whether in the field of healthcare, nutrition, computers, weaponry, transportation, and education, various innovations and technological advancements have radically changed the way of life for many people on the planet over the last centuries, with very noticeable changes even just over the last decade or two. Millions, if not billions of people have benefited tremendously from the march of progress. Who would argue otherwise? Two twentieth-century figures have a different view of the impact that technology has had on the human condition. Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul viewed technology differently than their contemporaries. In order to understand their particular points of view, one must first come to terms with their definitions of both technology and freedom. This introductory chapter will provide those definitions, as well as provide an overview of the chapters that outline the various perspectives that Merton and Ellul used to advance their argument that technology can and should be seen as a hindrance to humankind's attainment of freedom.

It should be noted that this book is not an attempt to label either Merton's or Ellul's particular point of view as "correct," or more accurate than other points of view that one might encounter in contemporary culture regarding technology. It is incumbent on the reader to discern the merits (or lack thereof) of the arguments presented herein. The intent is to compare the viewpoints that Merton and Ellul offer, identifying similarities, and occasionally differences, between their assertion that technology has had, and continues to have, a negative aspect. An additional objective is to provide scholars working in the fields of Merton and/or Ellul studies with avenues for further inquiry regarding the intellectual approaches that these two men brought to bear on this topic, as well as on other topics relating to

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the human condition in contemporary society. One final hope is that this book might compel the general reader to investigate both Merton and Ellul more closely, inviting new participants to the debate about our interaction with technology. Seven chapters support this discussion, focusing on three overarching perspectives through which Merton and Ellul formulated their thinking on technology. The first perspective will be the theological, followed by the sociological, and finally the political, presenting a general trajectory from the transcendent to the immanent. Following the examination of their political perspective will be a chapter comparing their literary output.

Chapter 1 is the introduction, which provides the definitions of technology and freedom that Merton and Ellul employed in their writing. Readers will note that these definitions are radically different from anything that might be encountered in popular culture, or encountered in the Western philosophical tradition in general. The similarity between their particular definitions of freedom is striking, and the chapters which follow illustrate the implications of their adherence to this definition.

Chapter 2 will provide an overview of both men's lives, although the intent is not to provide a simple biographical sketch. The objective will be to identify some common experiential sources for their worldviews as adults, specifically, their similar religious conversion experiences, and their upbringing in rural environments. The chapter will also address Ellul's theory of *technique* and explore both Ellul's and Merton's use of the dialectic as an intellectual device.

The third chapter will look at Merton and Ellul from a theological perspective, and begins with an overview of Karl Barth's (1886–1968) thought and its impact on both men. Barth's thought regarding the nature of freedom is foundational to Ellul's entire body of work. Merton refines some of this own thinking on the subject of freedom through his engagement with Barth's work. Critiques of the institutional church, referred to as the "visible church" as opposed to the "invisible church," are examined in this chapter, as both Merton and Ellul saw a disconnect between the individual practice of Christian faith and the institutional structures that purport to further such practice. They believe that the church has a specific role in helping humankind to identify the true self, and that technology has hindered the church in this regard. The true and false self are addressed in detail in chapter 4.

Chapter 4 examines the sociological perspective. Both Merton and Ellul were deeply influenced, but in different ways, by the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855). English philosopher Aldous Huxley (1894–1963) also influenced various aspects of both men’s thinking. This examination consists of another set of point-by-point Merton-Ellul comparisons beginning with their thinking on propaganda and the notion of the “mass man.” The idea of self-transcendence in their thinking will also be addressed. Throughout Merton’s writing, one finds references both implicitly and explicitly stated referring to the need to cast away the false self and seek the true self, allowing us to recognize and accept the gift of true freedom. Ellul does not emphasize the necessity to transcend the false self as emphatically as Merton does, but this idea is still one that he proposes as an essential step on the road to attaining freedom. Also discussed in this chapter will be technology’s role in the furtherance of propaganda and the role that it plays in hindering self-transcendence, the City as the ultimate manifestation of *technique*, and their respective views on non-violence.

Chapter 5 will cover the political perspective. Karl Marx influenced both Merton and Ellul. This profound antecedent to their thought is addressed first, followed by a point-by-point comparison of Merton’s and Ellul’s views on the city—a phenomenon that they both see as the ultimate manifestation of human technology, and a major impediment to the discovery of the true self, a discovery which both men believe to be a first step on the road to achieving freedom. Another point of comparison is their similar approach to social work and Roman Catholic social teaching, which provides an example of the type of life that one might live upon accepting the gift of true freedom as defined in chapter 2. Although a Protestant, Ellul shares an affinity for the work and writing of Roman Catholic luminaries such as Dorothy Day (1897–1980) and Peter Maurin (1877–1949). Day and Maurin both profoundly influenced Merton. Ellul, although a member of the Protestant French Reformed Church and not a Roman Catholic, provided some of the intellectual framework for this movement although he did not participate in the movement directly.

Merton and Ellul often directed their societal critiques at both the capitalist societies of the West and the communist societies of the East. A section is devoted to this tendency in their writing. This chapter concludes with a look at their quest for a “third way” in politics. While this third way does not directly correlate into a prescription for achieving true freedom, it suggests that both men believe that one can evade the grip of propaganda

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and *technique* to various degrees, ultimately serving as a point of departure from which one can potentially overcome the false self.

The sixth chapter evaluates Merton and Ellul as poets and literary figures. Both men wrote poems that allowed them to express many of their ideas regarding the insidious effects of technology on the human condition. In addition to comparing their poetry, this chapter will also look at their engagement with the work of Albert Camus (1913–1960) and Eugène Ionesco (1909–1994). Also considered in this chapter will be an assessment of the status of language and the written word in both Merton's and Ellul's thinking. They identify the Revealed Word as the source of human freedom, and this chapter focuses on their thinking regarding the tension between word and image in contemporary society. The seventh chapter concludes the study, introducing some avenues for further inquiry.

DEFINING TECHNOLOGY

Both Merton and Ellul refer to technology throughout their writing. At times, their reference is to a particular technological product, such as the automobile, the television, or even to the simple tape recorder. However, for the most part, when referring to technology, it is the technological process—the rationality and efficiency that has culminated in the idea of progress—that is being questioned. Ellul expresses this idea as “*technique*.” He wrote, “*Technique* refers to any complex of standardized means for attaining a predetermined result. Thus, it converts spontaneous and unreflective behavior into behavior that is deliberate and rationalized. The Technical Man is . . . committed to the never-ending search for “the one best way” to achieve any designated objective.”¹ With this statement, Ellul presented his forceful thesis that contemporary society is a “civilization committed to the quest for continually improved means to carelessly examined ends.”² It is the predominant theme of much of Ellul's work—a theme with which Thomas Merton agrees. Despite their different faiths and the fact that they never met or corresponded directly with each other, “Ellul and Merton are strikingly similar in their perception of *technique* and of *technique's* hold on the world.”³ Speaking of technology, Merton wrote:

1. Ellul, *Technological Society*, vi.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Davenport, “Jacques Ellul and Thomas Merton on Technique,” 10.

Technology. No! When it comes to taking sides, I am not with [those] who are open mouthed in awe at the “new holiness” of a technological cosmos in which man condescends to be God’s collaborator, and improve everything for Him. Not that technology is per se impious. It is simply neutral and there is no greater nonsense than taking it for an ultimate value . . . We gain nothing by surrendering to technology as if it were a ritual, a worship, a liturgy (or talking of our liturgy as if it were an expression of the “sacred” supposedly now revealed in technological power). Where impiety is in the hypostatizing of mechanical power as something to do with the Incarnation, as its fulfillment, its epiphany. When it comes to taking sides I am with Ellul . . .⁴

Merton’s agreement with Ellul on this point is the framework for this book. *Technique’s* deleterious impact on contemporary society will be the focal points for the chapters that follow.

It is also necessary to situate Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul within the framework of the debate over technology and the human condition. Carl Mitcham, a leading contemporary thinker regarding the nature and philosophy of technology, believes that “technology, or the making and using of artifacts, is a largely unthinking activity.”⁵ This particular description of technology captures the essence of the word as it relates to this study. Technology not only refers to specific products but also to the largely unthinking processes that result in the manufacture of both the products themselves and the perceived needs that precede the appearance of the products. Mitcham also provides a link between technology and theology—a crucial idea that both Merton and Ellul spoke about at length:

Theology has generally concentrated on analyzing an apparently contingent or disconnected series of moral problems obviously engendered by technology (industrial alienation, nuclear weapons, the social justice of development, biomedical engineering, mass media, etc.) without either systematically relating such specific issues or grounding them in more fundamental reflections on the relationship between faith and technological reasoning.⁶

In other words, Merton and Ellul will approach the issue of technology through the theological lens, and in doing so will address nuclear weapons

4. Merton, *Dancing in the Waters of Life*, 166.

5. Mitcham, *Thinking through Technology*, 1.

6. Mitcham, “Technology as a Theological Problem,” 3.

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and social justice—issues which Mitcham raises in the above quote. Nuclear weapons are of course part of the environmental backdrop against which both men wrote—having done the bulk of their writing during the height of the Cold War. The social justice of development is emphasized as part of Merton’s Roman Catholic social teaching, and the Protestant Ellul will engage this topic in his work. Both writers addressed mass media—Merton through his elaboration on the concept of the “mass man” and Ellul in his in-depth analysis of propaganda. Mitcham has thus introduced the problem confronting theology and theologians—how can one address these issues in a comprehensive Christian manner?

Many philosophers equate technology with machines. In particular, Lewis Mumford (1895–1990), an American urban planner and philosopher, did so in nearly all of his writing. According to Mumford, “the ‘machine’ may exist in other forms than as a physical object. The parts may not be metals but human beings; the organization may not be that embodied in the machine but an organizational chart; the source of power may not be electricity or the combustion of gas but muscle power or the pride of men; and the task may not be the manufacture of a product but the control of a nation.”⁷ Mumford not only equated technology with machines, but also with process, and more importantly, with the pursuit of power and control. This autonomous pursuit of power and control is similar to Ellul’s theory of *technique*. However, Mumford dismissed Ellul as “a sociological fatalist,” and so it is difficult to draw too many comparisons between Mumford and Ellul.⁸ Others would dismiss Ellul as too pessimistic—offering no way out of for the individual seeking to escape the technological society. Even Merton would at times find Ellul’s writing to be too pessimistic.

Merton’s critique of technology originally centered on the actual products of modern technology rather than on any particular process. Once he entered the monastery, he had hoped to put himself out of the world’s reach, but technology caught up with him. The abbot at that time, Dom James Fox, began a modernization project shortly after Merton entered the monastery at Gethsemane in Kentucky in December 1941. “The noisy tractors, replacing horses and wagons, annoyed a Merton who had come to the monastery seeking silence, and had suddenly found it becoming a place

7. Miller, “Effect of Technology,” 6.

8. Mumford, *Myth of the Machine*, 290–91; quoted in Fasching, *Thought of Jacques Ellul*, viii.

of noise and distraction.”⁹ Merton came face to face with the distractions that he had specifically sought to escape. It would be another two decades before he would read anything written by Ellul and before he would begin to formulate his thought regarding the deleterious influence that technology had on society as a whole.

In the meantime, Merton would correspond with Lewis Mumford, and some of Mumford’s ideas regarding the rapid pace of urbanization influenced Merton’s thought on the impact of technology upon contemporary society. However, once Merton had considered the impact that technology and the idea of progress was beginning to have on society as well as on the Church, he would later proclaim, “I also think that the [Vatican] needs to rest on a deeper realization of the urgent problems posed by technology today. (The Constitution on Mass Media seems to have been totally innocent of any such awareness.) For one thing, the whole massive complex of technology, which reaches into every aspect of social life today, implies a huge organization of which no one is really in control, and which dictates its own solutions irrespective of human needs or even of reason.”¹⁰ In this passage, Merton clearly identified technology with a process and a phenomenon rather than simply pointing to some particular product or machine. He also mentioned the mass media, which will be covered in chapter 4. Pointing out the fact that no one actually controls technology’s advance is another facet of this passage, placing Merton firmly in agreement with one of Ellul’s central tenets regarding *technique*. Merton continued, “Technology now has reasons entirely its own which do not necessarily take into account the needs of man, and this huge inhuman mechanism, which the whole human race is now serving rather than commanding, seems quite probably geared for the systematic destruction of the natural world, quite apart from the question of the ‘bomb’ which, in fact, is only one rather acute symptom of the whole disease.”¹¹ Merton equated actual products of technology with the technological process—a common tendency in much of his Cold War writing. However, he again demonstrated an affinity for Ellul’s concept of *technique* through his assertion that the entire process is one that continues to operate outside of humankind’s control. He concluded this lengthy discussion with the following:

9. Shannon, “Can One Be a Contemplative?,” 12.

10. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 383–84.

11. *Ibid.*

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I am not of course saying that technology is “bad,” and that progress is something to be feared. But I am saying that behind the cloak of specious myths about technology and progress, there seems to be at work a vast uncontrolled power which is leading man where he does not want to go in spite of himself and in which the Church, it seems to me, ought to be somewhat aware of the intervention of the “principalities and powers” of which St. Paul speaks. I know this kind of language is not very popular today, but I think it is so important that it cannot be left out of account. For instance I think that the monumental work of Jacques Ellul on *La Technique* is something that cannot be ignored by the Church Fathers if they wish to see all the aspects of the crucial question of the Church and the world.¹²

These statements represent the pinnacle of Merton’s thought regarding technology. It is informed by Ellul’s theory of *technique* as well as by his own personal experiences in dealing with the Church hierarchy—experiences which will be covered in detail in chapter 3.

Responding to the question of whether or not he was against technology *per se*, as opposed to specific technological products, Merton wrote, “What I am questioning is the universal myth that technology infallibly makes everything in every way better for everybody. It does not.”¹³ He also stated that “there has never been such abject misery on earth as that which our technological society has produced along with the fantastic plenty for very few. What I am ‘against’ then is a complacent and naïve progressivism which pays no attention to anything but the fact that wonderful things can be and are done with machinery and with electronics.”¹⁴ These statements demonstrate that Merton’s fully developed thought regarding technology was remarkably similar to Ellul’s, although Merton would occasionally gravitate towards radical anti-technology statements while criticizing other facets of the social and political scene in the 1960s. For example, he remarked that “in our technological world we have wonderful methods for keeping people alive and wonderful methods for killing them off, and they both go together. We rush in and save lives from tropical diseases, then we come in with napalm and burn up the people we have saved. The net result is more murder, more suffering, more inhumanity. This I know is

12. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 383–84.

13. Merton, *Road to Joy*, 98.

14. *Ibid.*, 99.

a caricature, but is it that far from the truth?”¹⁵ He combined a critique of not only the products of advanced technology but also the mindset of efficiency and power exemplified in contemporary society. Like Ellul, he sought a way out, but unlike Ellul, he offers at least the statement, “What is my answer? I don’t have one, except to suggest that technology could be used entirely differently. But the only way it ever will be is to get it free from this inescapable hang-up with profit and power, so that it will be used for people and not for money or politics.”¹⁶ Ellul would not concede that humans willfully wield technology, since *technique* maintains its own set of values that ensure its continued advance.

Like Ellul, Merton believed that an uncritical acceptance of the idea that technological progress offered a panacea to all of humankind’s ills was dangerous and misguided. His thinking paralleled Ellul in this regard. Merton stated that “if technology helps to express the creative power of love, then all the better: it will give glory to God and have its own place in the Kingdom of God on earth. But technology by itself will never establish that Kingdom.”¹⁷ As Merton’s thought on the topic coalesced, he repeatedly turned to Ellul, who had come to represent for Merton the leading thinker on technology. Merton stated that “the old structures, manifestly inadequate in some ways, are being taken away, and instead of being spiritually liberated, Christians are rushing to submit to much more tyrannical structures: the *absolute* dominion of technology-politics-business (or state capital) . . . Have you by any chance read the book of Jacques Ellul on the *Technological Society* (perhaps *La Technique* in French)? It is monumental, and one of the most important treatises on the subject.”¹⁸ Merton wondered how one could account for the dilemma posed by technology. Was contemporary society helpless to check the further spread of technology and the idea of progress? Seeking to discern some rationale for this phenomenon, and approaching the topic in a manner consistent with a viewpoint that either Merton or Ellul might have adopted, one might ask:

Why would humanity accept a regime of “technique” that nurtured a coarsened view of social relationships? As the physicist Max Born noted, it was a triumph of the intellect instead of reason. The intellect distinguished between the possible and the impossible,

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., 99–100.

18. Merton, *Hidden Ground of Love*, 468.

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while reason distinguished between the sensible and the senseless. Thus, manned space flight could simultaneously be a triumph of intellect and a failure of reason.¹⁹

The use of the word “technique” in this passage does not necessarily imply acceptance of Ellul’s definition of the term, but according to Max Born, the combined play of intellect and reason serve to propel technology forward. Born, like Merton and Ellul, sought to explain how technology could progress on paths which seemed to be so far divergent from the interests of the greater part of humanity.

Throughout this study, the word “technology” will refer to either specific machines or tools, or to the intellectual process that leads to the creation of these types of products. In some cases, the idea of progress will be the focal point of both Merton’s and Ellul’s concern. Often, the study will address the idea that technology is a panacea with the potential to deliver greater freedom. This is a common perception, pervasive in twenty-first-century America. Albert Borgmann addresses it in his 2003 *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*, stating that “the full promise of technology has always been one of special liberty and prosperity. The promise inaugurated the modern era and has to this day animated our society’s most coordinated and strenuous efforts. It comes to the fore in advertisements, the public proclamations of our furtive aspirations.”²⁰ Merton and Ellul agree with Borgmann that technology’s promises have often turned out to be hidden perils. It is precisely this mindset and the acceptance of progress as the answer to our human problems that Merton and Ellul challenge in much of their work.

DEFINING FREEDOM

Often used interchangeably with the word “liberty,” freedom for Ellul and Merton carries a different connotation than that usually associated with the term. For both Merton and Ellul, the notion of individual choice or the decision to act in a certain manner is not the type of freedom advocated by these two men. In Ellul’s case, the choice that must be made in order to attain true freedom is the choice to live out the will of God. Ellul proclaimed, “We know God fully only in Jesus Christ. Now Jesus Christ is free, and

19. Thompson, *Between Science and Religion*, 120.

20. Borgmann, *Power Failure*, 121.

this—but only this—enables us to speak with complete assurance of the freedom of God. The Gospels clearly show that Christ is the only free man. Free, he chose to keep the law. Free, he chose to live out the will of God. Free, he chose incarnation. Free, he chose to die.”²¹ This passage illustrates the relationship between “choice” and “freedom.” One must choose to accept the will of God, and freedom is attainable once one makes this choice. Ellul is not referring to the many consumer choices available to us, or to lifestyle choices, or in choosing one television program over another. In deciding amongst these things, we do not exemplify our gift of freedom. According to Ellul:

Freedom is not one element in the Christian life. It is not one of its forms. It does not express itself accidentally, or according to circumstances, or through encounters. In some circumstances temperance is the work of faith, in others faithfulness, in others strict justice, in others extreme clemency. Freedom, however, is not like this. It is not part or a fragmentary expression of the Christian life. It is the Christian life.²²

For Thomas Merton, “the simplest definition of freedom is this: it means the ability to do the will of God.”²³ This definition also presents freedom as grounded in a commitment to the Christian faith. Accepting the message that Jesus Christ freely chose to live his life in accordance with God’s will is the first step on the road to freedom. This is what both Merton and Ellul mean when they refer to “freedom”—the choice to pattern one’s life in this way. Many people would consider the type of freedom espoused by Merton and Ellul to be the very opposite of freedom as generally understood in contemporary culture. However, it is an acceptance of the Christian message and a commitment to live one’s life in accordance with this message that defines freedom for these two men.

Merton recorded the following in his journal on October 21, 1950:

The Church (Christ) is our liberator. Submission to her authority is *freedom*. Catholicity is freedom—*no* limitation on the spirit. Authority prohibits what limits and restricts the spirit of men . . . Holy Spirit must be permitted to “breathe where He will” in spiritual exercises and retreats . . . Churches not to be locked up outside time of public liturgical services. Freedom protected by

21. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 51.

22. *Ibid.*, 104.

23. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 201.

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protection of unity in spiritual life—error of those who had begun to create a division between public and private prayer, “morality and contemplation.”²⁴

Identifying freedom with an adherence to his Roman Catholic faith, Merton firmly proclaimed that voluntary submission to divine authority is the embodiment of freedom for humankind. Merton also derived some of his thinking on the nature of freedom from St. Bernard, who “believed that man is made solely for the purpose of loving God, but this love must be expressed in freedom; the progress of the spiritual life must take place in an atmosphere of liberty.”²⁵ Freedom thus represents both the conscious decision to live out one’s life in search of God and in acting according to His will.

In contemporary culture, freedom is not usually linked to choices regarding the Gospel message. Regarding a theologically framed definition of freedom, John F. Kilner, the director for the Center for Bioethics and Human Dignity, proposes that this view of freedom is “fundamentally different from the concept of autonomy commonly invoked in the public sphere. Autonomy (literally ‘self-law’) suggests not only that people have responsibility for making choices, but that the choices they make are right by virtue of the fact that they made them.”²⁶ Kilner’s quotation above reflects the commonly accepted notion of human autonomy and freedom, ideas that provide the foundation for Western democratic values. He goes on to explain that “a more biblical understanding of freedom rejects the latter notion, insisting instead that there are standards of right and wrong that are independent of people’s own wishes and desires. People may make wrong choices. God allows them the freedom to do so, but that does not mean the choices are right.”²⁷

The dialectic between freedom and necessity is the core of all of Ellul’s thought.²⁸ Much of what he means by freedom can be understood only in relation to the Fall—humankind’s fall from grace in the Garden of Eden.

24. Merton, *Entering the Silence*, 436.

25. Adams, *Thomas Merton’s Shared Contemplation*, 110.

26. Kilner, “Physician-Assisted Suicide,” cited in Demy and Stewart, *Suicide*, 135. In making this distinction between theologically grounded freedom in which life is lived according to God’s rule, and freedom as commonly construed in contemporary society, Kilner specifically references Ellul’s *Ethics of Freedom*.

27. *Ibid.*

28. Goddard, *Living the Word*, xx.

Ellul uses this intellectual construct to define freedom in greater detail in *To Will and To Do* (1969), in which he stated that before the Fall, man was

free before God, which is to say that he could love God as well as cease to love him. He was free before God, but that freedom did not at all relate to some choice between doing and not doing, between a Yes and a No, after painstaking deliberation. To think in that manner about freedom shows clearly that we know nothing about it. We are distorting it, mutilating it, mummifying it. Freedom, precisely because it *is* freedom, cannot be defined in that way as an indetermination of choice.²⁹

For Ellul, freedom is possibility, a constant process of action and virtue. Ellul scholar David Gill describes this freedom as “God’s gift and response to man’s hope.”³⁰ On the other hand, as Ellul himself explains, “Freedom is first a power of possibility—a power to act and obey.”³¹ One chooses to accept the gift of freedom, or to reject it. This idea is also seen in Merton’s conception of freedom.

Elaborating upon the idea that it is the necessities that hinder man’s freedom, and that it is the necessities which we attempt to overcome by choosing freedom, David Gill stated, “Before the fall there was freedom; the fall brought chaos and confusion.”³² The Fall ushered in “necessity,” which did not previously exist. Struggling against necessity, humankind grasps at freedom, which

is not imposed on the reconciled . . . Freedom is arrested, rejected, undermined; Satan is still the “prince of this world.” Though it is a crushing burden (and no cause for gloating), and Christians have failed miserably (again, no cause for gloating), it is nevertheless true, in Ellul’s view, that Christians alone, in virtue of their conscious relationship to Jesus Christ, have the possibility of mediating freedom.³³

As Canadian political philosopher George Grant (1918–1988) once wrote, “He [Ellul] does not write of necessity to scare men, but to make them free.”³⁴ While Ellul and Merton both focus much of their writing on the

29. Ellul, *To Will and to Do*, 5.

30. Gill, “Jacques Ellul’s Ethics,” 6.

31. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 103.

32. Gill, *Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul*, 33.

33. *Ibid.*, 47.

34. Grant, review of *Technological Society*, 416; quoted in Temple, “Jacques Ellul,” 6.

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idea of freedom, it is not merely a term to be defined or a concept to be grasped. It also plays an important role in Ellul's worldview *per se*. In an interview in 1988, Ellul made the following statement concerning his theological methodology:

I have sought to confront theological and biblical knowledge and sociological analysis without trying to come to any artificial or philosophical synthesis; instead I try to place the two face to face, in order to shed some light on what is real socially and real spiritually. That is why I can say that the reply to each of my sociological analyses is found implicitly in a corresponding theological book, and inversely my theology is fed on socio-political experience. But I refuse to construct a *system* of thought, or to offer up some Christian or prefabricated socio-political solutions. I want only to provide Christians with the means of thinking out *for themselves* the meaning of their involvement in the modern world.³⁵

For Ellul, freedom serves two purposes in his writing. The first is to describe man's condition before the Fall and the condition that man in the contemporary world still seeks, although attaining true freedom requires one to transcend the necessities (those things that humankind must do to survive), which have become a greater obstacle thanks to the technological society and *technique*. The nature of the challenge posed by technology will provide the narrative for the following chapters. Second, the dialectical tension between freedom and necessity provides the foundation for Ellul's entire body of work.

In order for Christians to figure out their place in the modern world, as Ellul suggests, they must understand what it means to be free. Understanding *technique* and the necessities is essential to conceptualize freedom in the dialectical methodology that Ellul employs. He provides clarification in the introduction to *The Technological Society*:

In my conception, freedom is not an immutable fact graven in the heart of man. It is not inherent in man or in society, and it is meaningless to write it into law. The mathematical, physical, sociological, and psychological sciences reveal nothing but necessities and determinisms, and freedom consists in overcoming and transcending these determinisms. Freedom is completely without meaning unless it is related to necessity, unless it represents victory over necessity. . . . We must look at it dialectically, and say that man is indeed determined, but that it is open to him to overcome

35. Gill, "Dialectic of Theology and Sociology," 1.

necessity, and that this *act* is freedom . . . He is most enslaved when he thinks he is comfortably settled in freedom.³⁶

For Ellul, freedom itself has a dialectical nature. It is not an act in and of itself—a goal to obtain or a state of repose. It is a constant struggle against the necessities. In order to transcend the necessities, of which *technique* is one of the most visible manifestations, one must choose deliberately and act accordingly. This conscious act is freedom. Those that do not seek to transcend their determined condition choose not to be free.

Ellul's use of the dialectical method is apparent in his discussion of the nature of freedom. He stated that “as we are always sinners and always righteous, so we are always slaves and always freed.”³⁷ However, this dialectical emphasis has a tendency to cloud the true meaning of freedom in Ellul's thought. Turning to Karl Barth, we can gain a more complete understanding of freedom in Ellul's worldview. Chapter 3 will further examine Ellul's intellectual debt to Barth, but is necessary to illustrate the extent to which Ellul's dialectical presentation of freedom is derived from Barth's work. Having many times acknowledged his intellectual debt to Barth, the area of freedom is one in which Ellul makes it clear that Barth does not go far enough. Ellul stated that

Barth, of course, has a great deal to say about freedom in his *Church Dogmatics*. In most cases, however, the reference is to God. Freedom is a freedom for God . . . But it is far too restricted. In these circumstances it is not surprising that for ordinary people in the church freedom has neither meaning nor content and poses no questions. It is a theme which has vanished from the Christian horizons.³⁸

Again Ellul brings the dialectic into play by stating that freedom “poses no questions” for ordinary people. What, then, is the question that it poses for Christians, and how critical is it to understand what this question is in order to fully grasp Ellul's definition of freedom? If, as Goddard states, “The dialectic between freedom and necessity is the central and controlling idea in all of Ellul's work,” then it is essential to try and grasp this elusive concept.³⁹ Freedom and the dialectical method are hallmarks of Ellul's writ-

36. Ellul, *Technological Society*, xxxii–xxxiii.

37. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 104.

38. *Ibid.*, 105.

39. Goddard, *Living the Word*, 61.

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ing and his thought. Ellul believed that “we live in permanent dialectical tension between the necessity of the world and the freedom of the Wholly Other.”⁴⁰

Therefore, for Ellul, freedom is the God-given gift to live life according to God’s commandments. It is not simply the “right” to choose one thing over another, or the commonly construed ability to choose between types of products, merchandise, or lifestyle choices. Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness is not the encapsulation of freedom in his thinking. Ellul’s freedom is a radical acceptance of God’s grace. It flows from his acceptance of the Word of God through his religious conversion (discussed in chapter 2), from his reading of Kierkegaard and Barth, and is expressed in dialectic against the necessity of *technique*.

Thomas Merton held a similar notion of freedom, but with some important differences. Throughout his writing, Merton discussed freedom both metaphorically and poetically. Having “left the world” when he entered the monastery in December 1941, many would consider Merton to have given up his freedom. Nevertheless, as he recalled in his autobiography, “Brother Matthew locked the gate behind me and I was enclosed in the four walls of my new freedom.”⁴¹ Clearly, his conception of freedom differed considerably from that which was commonly held by most people in mid-twentieth-century America. Referring to this notion of Merton giving up his freedom, Merton scholar Raymond Bailey observed:

Most men spend their lives in a small corner of the world yearning for broader horizons, for open doors through which they may move to become “men of the world.” Thomas Merton came as near to being born a cosmopolitan man as is possible, but his longing was for a solitary reservation in an out of the way place where he could put down roots . . . a place where he could breathe fresh air, smell aromas untainted by asphalt, sewage, and the like . . . a place where he could see the sky, hear himself—and God—and as a result become a universal man. Behind walls as drab as those of any prison . . . he discovered freedom.⁴²

This paragraph demonstrates some similarities with Ellul’s thought, but there are some subtle differences as well. The idea that freedom is found outside of the bonds of society—a society determined by *technique* and

40. Gill, “Dialectic of Theology and Sociology,” 2.

41. Merton, *Seven Storey Mountain*, 372.

42. Bailey, *Thomas Merton on Mysticism*, 33.

under sway of the necessities—is prevalent. Other ideas that will be explored in this and later chapters relate to the notion of the city as a hindrance to the full expression of man’s freedom, and the need to transcend the false self, which is imposed upon individuals by society. Contradictory to Ellul’s notion of freedom is the element of choice inherent in Merton’s decision to enter the monastery in pursuit of an objective that one could describe as an end in itself. Perhaps Ellul’s notion of freedom as constant action, as constant struggle against the necessities, is lacking in this description of Merton’s search for freedom, but that idea will be explored later in this chapter.

Illuminating even further Merton’s conception of freedom is his statement, “Thus, once again, we see that Nirvana is not an escape from phenomena and from the everyday world with its problems and risks, but a realization of that Void and True Self which is the common ontological ground of both personal freedom and the objective, problematical world.”⁴³ These ideas will be further refined in chapter 4 in the discussion on the centrality of self-transcendence as a means of achieving freedom.

More likely to use the term “liberty” than Ellul, Merton nevertheless presents a number of ideas similar to Ellul’s notion of freedom. He referred to freedom frequently in *New Seeds of Contemplation* (1961), stating, “The mind that is the prisoner of conventional ideas, and the will that is the captive of its own desire cannot accept the seeds of an unfamiliar truth and a supernatural desire. For how can I receive the seeds of freedom if I am in love with slavery and how can I cherish the desire of God if I am filled with another and an opposite desire?”⁴⁴ This “slavery” to which Merton refers could be likened to Ellul’s theory of *technique*, or to the necessities that Ellul describes at length throughout his writing. Ellul often referred to “the powers,” which he described as “spiritual realities which are independent of human decision and whose power is not constituted by human decision.”⁴⁵ Perhaps Merton was alluding to this notion of the powers as entities that captivate human behavior but are beyond human control. Of course, *technique* is another manifestation of the powers, as it is a force which acts on all of humankind, yet remains beyond our control. The “opposite desire” referred to by Merton can be seen as man refusing to participate in an act of transcendence over *technique*. Merton elaborated when he stated that

43. Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, 285.

44. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 16.

45. Goddard, “Ellul on Scripture and Idolatry,” 6.

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“God cannot plant His liberty in me because I am a prisoner and I do not even desire to be free.”⁴⁶ Again there are differences here between the exact nature of freedom that Ellul described and Merton’s rendering of freedom as an attribute directly given to us by God, but the overall impression is that without this freedom, man is embedded in the immanent and unable to appreciate the transcendent. Merton continued his description of God implanting freedom in us, illustrating the consequences of our refusal to accept it. He stated, “If these seeds would take root in my liberty, and if His will would grow from my freedom, I would become the love that He is . . .”⁴⁷ If this freedom is accepted, “I would grow together with thousands and millions of other freedoms into the gold of one huge field praising God.”⁴⁸

Chapter 2 will explain that Merton spent his young life prior to entering the monastery as somewhat of a Bohemian, travelling frequently, and savoring the pleasures of the world. Prior to entering the monastery, “Merton was . . . free, in the world’s sense.”⁴⁹ Anyone who reads his autobiography can conclude that in his early twenties, Merton was certainly free according to the accepted notions of freedom in Western culture. However, speaking of freedom, he wrote:

Every moment and every event of every man’s life on earth plants something in his soul. For just as the wind carries thousands of winged seeds, so each moment brings with it germs of spiritual vitality that come to rest imperceptibly in the minds and wills of men. Most of these unnumbered seeds perish and are lost, because men are not prepared to receive them: for such seeds as these cannot spring up anywhere except in the good soil of freedom . . .⁵⁰

How does this observation compare with Ellul’s view of freedom? Giving further indication that not only does one’s freedom originate with God, but the primary impediments to this freedom are similar to Ellul’s notion of *technique*, Merton went on to say that “Pope John’s message of freedom calls man, first of all, to liberate himself from the climate of confusion and desperation in which he finds himself because he passively accepts and

46. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 16.

47. *Ibid.*, 17.

48. *Ibid.*

49. Kline, “In the Company of Prophets?” 126.

50. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, 14.

follows a mindless determinism.”⁵¹ This “determinism” resembles Ellul’s notion of *technique*.

Merton would not agree with Ellul’s assertion that only Christians could discover true freedom, or that the inability to attain freedom was a problem only for contemporary Christians. Merton’s ecumenism would distinguish him from certain types of exclusivist Christianity in this regard. He stated:

Today more than ever, man in chains is seeking emancipation and liberty. His tragedy is that he seeks it by means that bring him into ever greater enslavement. But freedom is a spiritual thing. It is a sacred and religious reality. Its roots are not in man, but in God . . . In other words, for man to be free he must be delivered *from himself*. This means not that he must be delivered only from another like himself: for the tyranny of man over man is but the external expression of each man’s enslavement to his own desires. For he who is the slave of his own desires necessarily exploits others in order to pay tribute to the tyrant within himself.⁵²

How does the idea of *technique* relate to this phrase? As in Merton’s earlier quotation in which he engaged the idea of slavery, is the “greater enslavement” to which Merton refers in this passage in some way comparable to the impact that Ellul ascribes to *technique*? While similarities and differences with Ellul have been noted, both Merton and Ellul would find common ground through their reading of and interpretation of the work of Karl Barth. According to Ellul, “Karl Barth has dealt very thoroughly with the matter [of freedom] at various points in the *Church Dogmatics*, and . . . I am in full accord with his presentation.”⁵³ Chapter 3 will discuss Barth’s influence on both Ellul and Merton and their notions of freedom.

51. Merton, *Seeds of Destruction*, 105.

52. Merton, *Inner Experience*, 153.

53. Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 120.