

## **The Dysfunctions of A Global Technological Era** by David W. Gill [www.davidwgill.org](http://www.davidwgill.org)

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Jacques Ellul's writings provide not one but several perspectives from which to view critically the horrors of September 11. Most immediately, perhaps, one thinks of Ellul's discussion of violence and counter-violence. What will be the result of relying on overwhelming force to suppress Al Qaeda? Could American Christians with any legitimacy claim God's support for their military actions against their Muslim enemies? Is it possible to break the cycle of violence? What would it take? Ellul's answers to such questions would not be likely to please large numbers of people.

Ellul's thinking about religion is also pertinent. He was very critical of various aspects of the Muslim tradition (cf. *Subversion of Christianity* (1984; ET 1986), Ch 5 "The Influence of Islam") including its legalism, repression of women, and its support for slavery, colonization, and holy war. One wonders where Muslims and non-Muslims could possibly find common ground for peaceful co-existence after reading Ellul (and his longer book-length study of Islam was never published because the French publishers thought it politically too hot to handle!).

But it should not be thought that the critique of Islam ends the discussion of religion for Ellul. He was tougher still on Christians for selling out their unique witness for an unholy political/cultural/economic replacement faith that in practice worships money, power, and technology. The outrage that many Muslims feel toward the West and America is most emphatically not due to the "offense of the Gospel" or the "scandal of the cross" as the New Testament puts it. It is not the suffering, redemptive love of the cross but the blustering, arrogant greed of corporate and cultural imperialists that has won the west and now is a stench in much of the world's nostrils.

Ellul's views of revolution, revolt, and social change would also provide interesting lenses through which to view the rise and character of Muslim Fundamentalist movements like the Taliban and the Iranian leadership. Are these mere revolts in protest of a juggernaut technological development? Or do they have genuine revolutionary potential?

Nevertheless, what interests me most in thinking about Ellul and 9/11 is his description of the irresistible "universalism" of Technique (cf. *Technological Society*, 1954; ET 1964, pp. 116-133). In our contemporary terminology, globalization is inevitable: all parts of the globe will be conquered by technology and technological rationality. In all parts of the globe, distinctive, traditional values, habits, and techniques will yield to a common technological platform.

Wherever technology invades, it conquers and replaces old cultures. Ellul argues that religion is receding before technology. Buddhism and Hinduism are collapsing. He does not mention Islam or Christianity but he clearly intends us to think that they too must yield to technological development.

September 11 demonstrates this triumphant universalism of technology in several ways. It is globalized technology that has invaded Afghan societies, arming them to fight against the Soviet Union in the 80s. It is global technology that brings an increasingly homogeneous and aggravating media diet into homes and neighborhoods around the globe. It is global technology that enabled the organization of Al Qaeda and it was advanced technology that was used to bring down the World Trade Center. Our lives are thoroughly interwoven by technology. And, of course, the anti-terrorist response is also carried out on the most advanced global technological platform. The whole experience will knit us more tightly together technologically than ever. Commerce and war were the great drivers of technological universalism in the past, Ellul argued. Looks like little has changed there.

But we must come back to Islam. For it appears that Islam is not so easily disposed of or coopted by technological society. Ellul criticized technological society as being ultimately meaningless and dehumanizing, and so it is. But isn't this why Islam has such an appeal? It is a powerful counter-narrative of history and meaning.

Can a fundamentalist Muslim civilization stand up to and overcome technological civilization? I doubt it. But I also doubt that it will take "No" for an answer from the global technological society. A succession of progressively more destructive "revolts" and rebellions (in effect "suicide bombings") is probably in our future, more so after the bombing of Afghanistan than before, because of the inexorable laws of violence.

Unless! In the face of what looked like technological determinism, Ellul was steadfastly a man of hope throughout his life. He believed in a "Wholly Other" God breaking into human history in surprising ways. He believed that individuals and small communities could have tremendous long-term impact if they stopped trying to manipulate and calculate such impact and instead gathered intransigently and wholeheartedly around truth and then lived out that truth in the midst of the world's reality.