



## Dialectic as Method in Public Theology: Recalling Jacques Ellul

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### Abstract

This article recalls the contribution of Jacques Ellul's theological methodology as a resource for public theology. The first part of the study surveys Ellul's contribution as a public theologian, while the second responds to Ellul's reflections on the theme of dialectic and evaluates the significance of Ellulian-style dialectical theology for public theology. The term 'dialectic' is one Ellul used to describe his own mode of theological engagement. For Ellul, dialectic implies dialogue, which entails both presence (being with, so as to be able to converse) and distance (being apart, so as to be able to contribute something different). What Ellul affirms about a dialectical stance is valuable in so far as it enables theology to grapple with complexity and contradiction, which is important for public theology because the conversation between theology and the wider public now usually occurs in the absence of shared assumptions and values.

### Keywords

dialectic, Jacques Ellul, method in public theology

By any criteria one would wish to name, Jacques Ellul was a public theologian. Yet in the burgeoning literature on what has come to be named 'public theology', Ellul seems not to feature among those whose work is perceived to provide resources from which to draw or direction for the way ahead. This is not to say that his legacy has been completely ignored by those interested in the public significance of Christian theology, but as Clifford Christians observes in an issue of *The Ellul Forum* devoted to the theme of 'Ellul in the Public Arena':

Those influenced by Ellul's work continue to make public space their home [like Ellul himself who 'lived in the public arena' and whose 'defining orientation was

public life as a whole’]. Some are scholars in the traditional sense, but most have a special heart for everyday life and the non-specialist.<sup>1</sup>

This study will have served its purpose if it helps, first, to recall Ellul within the context of engaging public theology and, secondly, to retrieve his notion of dialectic as a useful methodological resource. To that end, it provides an overview of Ellul as public theologian and discusses his particular conception of dialectic.

### Jacques Ellul as Public Theologian

For over half a century, Ellul provoked Christians to think more critically about their faith, particularly in relation to pressing socio-political, cultural and ethical questions. His death on 19 May 1994 deprived the church and theology of an incisive thinker. Ellul was gifted intellectually, combining breadth of knowledge, penetrating analytical skills and critical acumen. Trained as a legal historian, he was also a social analyst, biblical scholar, theologian and ethicist; in each of these respective fields he produced works of genuine significance. In short, he was an original, independent thinker who belongs in the top rank of twentieth-century Christian intellectuals.

Ellul claimed that his independence of thought was inculcated during childhood by having to find his own answers to questions because the adults he knew were unable to answer them. In Ellul’s view:

This was very helpful for the later development of my mind; I ultimately did everything by myself. Every time I came up against an intellectual, philosophical or scientific difficulty, I no longer sought out authorities. I never looked for anyone to explain anything to me. I worked on the problem until I could explain it to myself. That was the basis of a whole intellectual attitude.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the whole story, however. Ellul learned much from others, especially his close friends, Bernard Charbonneau and Jean Bosc. Late in life he paid tribute to the importance of friendships for his thinking as well as for his

<sup>1</sup> Clifford Christians, ‘About this Issue’, *The Ellul Forum*, 25 (July 2000), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work*, trans. Joachim Neugroschel and ed. William H. Vanderburg (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), pp. 13–14.

quality of life.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, he was deeply indebted intellectually to Søren Kierkegaard, Karl Marx and Karl Barth.

Two other points about Ellul's mode of thought are also noteworthy. The first is that he was not one to theorize without being engaged in specific practical ways, even if he called for rigorous scrutiny of the basis for one's practical involvement. 'For me', he states, 'it's always the same problem. Intellectual interest means concrete commitment, practical and political involvement'.<sup>4</sup> While he regarded some of his efforts as failures, two areas of involvement he considered worthwhile were his work with young delinquents and his ecological activism. Discussing Ellul's political and social activities, Andrew Goddard notes that 'despite Ellul's disenchantment with mainstream politics, he never withdrew from commenting or acting upon matters of interest in the political and social realm'.<sup>5</sup>

A second significant feature of Ellul's mind-set was his persistent self-criticism. He notes that 'the first rigorous step one should take is the critique of one's own biases'.<sup>6</sup> Not one to preach what he did not practise, he applied this precept to himself: 'every time I have acquired a belief, in any domain, the first thing I have done is to conduct a criticism of this belief'.<sup>7</sup> In a similar vein, he struggled with the competing obligations of being both a Christian and an intellectual. In a candid moment, he explained how he was constantly torn between commitments associated with his 'intellectual vocation' and the responsibility he felt to spend time with others so as to reveal God's love in practical ways: 'So I am faced with the necessity of continually reassessing my use of time, questioning it. Never satisfied'.<sup>8</sup> Whatever one's estimate of Ellul, he was neither complacent nor self-indulgent.

When reading Ellul one must come to grips with his trenchant, uncompromising style. In print he brooks no rivals and often resorts to hyperbole and

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Ellul's Response to the Symposium in his Honor at the University of Bordeaux, November 1993', *The Ellul Forum*, 13 (July 1994), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Goddard, *Living the Word, Resisting the World: The Life and Thought of Jacques Ellul* (Carlisle, Cumbria and Waynesboro: Paternoster Press, 2002), p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, trans. Lani K. Niles, based on interviews by Madeleine Garrigou-Lagrange (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), p. 3; cf. Jacques Ellul, *Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology, and Politics: Conversations with Patrick Troude-Chasteney*, trans. Joan Mendès France (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 227.

caustic rhetoric. Some attribute this to his prophetic stance vis-à-vis the contemporary situation.<sup>9</sup> Certainly his stinging invective was appropriate for a twentieth-century gadfly in the tradition of Socrates and Søren Kierkegaard. In this connection, I am reminded of Flannery O'Connor's explanation for the 'grotesque' imagery and characterization in her short stories and novellas:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal means of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock—to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures.<sup>10</sup>

Ellul was no novelist, but his smarting style nevertheless illustrates the truth of another of Flannery O'Connor's observations: 'Those writers who speak for and with their age are able to do so with a great deal more ease and grace than those who speak counter to prevailing attitudes'.<sup>11</sup> Ellul's 'Christian concerns' put him at odds not only with contemporary western society but also with the church.

Ellul was not one to court disciples and uncritical admirers; he hoped, rather, to help others find ways of being faithful to the good news of Jesus Christ in their own circumstances. Perhaps more accurately, he aimed to clarify the social context or situation within which Christians are called to be both faithful and responsible. In any case, he refused to advise people on how to act. An observation from *In Season, Out of Season* sums up his attitude in this regard:

At the end of my books, readers are called to take action and make their own decisions, and they surely say to themselves, 'This is very annoying. I don't see which action I can take.' They would prefer a last chapter in which someone would tell

<sup>9</sup> David W. Gill, *The Word of God in the Ethics of Jacques Ellul* (Metuchen and London: American Theological Library Association and Scarecrow Press, 1984), pp. 179–85; Daniel B. Clendenin, *Theological Method in Jacques Ellul* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1987), pp. 129–30.

<sup>10</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961), pp. 33–4.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47.

them, 'Here is what you must think and do.' This last chapter I will never write. Even my ethic does not say to the Christian, 'Here is what is good and here is what is evil.' It does exactly the opposite. 'You are liberated, you are called to be human beings before God. Now decide for yourselves concretely what is to be done.'<sup>12</sup>

In 1930, when Ellul was eighteen, a law student and supporting his ailing parents, he read Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. Marx provided him with an interpretation of the socio-economic aspects of life, but he found nothing in Marx to help him understand his personal condition. Shortly thereafter he found an answer to this existential dimension of life in the Bible, particularly Romans 8, which in Ellul's words, 'gave me a response both on the individual level and on the collective level. I saw a perspective beyond history, one that is definitive'.<sup>13</sup> From that point to the end of his life, he remained torn between Marx and the Bible. When reading Ellul, it is helpful to keep in mind his dual concern with so-called objective conditions of life and the subjective, existential aspects of life. In this respect, he combined the insights of Marx and Kierkegaard, each of whom influenced him profoundly.<sup>14</sup> He once described the tension or 'permanent contradiction' between his Christian faith and his indebtedness to Marx as 'the key to all my later thinking',<sup>15</sup> by which he meant that this double commitment forced him to think dialectically.

My understanding and appreciation of Ellul's literary legacy was enhanced by learning that as early as 1942–3, and perhaps earlier, he had formulated a plan of research and writing corresponding to his twofold commitment to Jesus and Marx.<sup>16</sup> On one hand, he considered it necessary to conduct a sociological analysis of the situation in Europe following World War II; on the other, he thought it necessary to acquire a good theological education, which

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<sup>12</sup> Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 197. (Whether Christians can, or even should, decide for themselves when it comes to moral matters is debatable, but Ellul tended to focus on the ethical responsibility of individual believers rather than on the role of the church in Christian moral formation. In this respect, his significance for public theology is ambiguous, since it is possible to construe his ethic in individualistic terms.)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>14</sup> See David C. Menninger, 'Marx in the Social Thought of Jacques Ellul', and Vernard Eller, 'Ellul and Kierkegaard: Closer than Brothers', in Clifford G. Christians and Jay M. Van Hook, eds, *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), pp. 17–31 and 52–66.

<sup>15</sup> Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> Goddard, *Living the Word*, pp. 52–3.

for him meant a solid grounding in Scripture and familiarity with various methods of interpretation. However, he refused to regard these two lines of research and writing as isolated fields of inquiry; instead, he viewed them as related to each other in dialectical tension: ‘I felt very early . . . that a relation of mutual criticism should exist between the two. Sociology should be the means of criticizing theology, and vice versa’.<sup>17</sup> More specifically: ‘Sociology seemed to me a very useful instrument in sorting out within theology that which is timely from that which is not’.<sup>18</sup> In other words, sociology helps to keep theology relevant. Alternatively, theology criticizes the reductionistic tendencies of the social sciences by ‘requiring us to consider the human phenomenon in its totality instead of separating it into parts’.<sup>19</sup> Theology also provided Ellul with a transcendent reference point for his sociological analysis and criticism.<sup>20</sup> From the beginning, the two lines of this research agenda were pursued together; his practice was to work simultaneously on a sociological study and a theological or biblical study.

While Ellul’s scheme consisted of two specific lines of research and writing, he claimed not to have consciously planned particular pairs of books as ‘compositions in counterpoint’—apart from *The Ethics of Freedom*, which he did plan as the ‘dialectical counterpoint’ to his studies on ‘Technique’.<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere, however, he noted that *The Politics of God and the Politics of Man* is the theological counterpart to *The Political Illusion*, while *The Meaning of the City* corresponds to *The Technological Society*.<sup>22</sup> He also conceded, after someone pointed this out to him in a letter, that *Hope in Time of Abandonment* ‘answered in advance’ his book on *The Technological System*.<sup>23</sup> Despite these specific correlations, it is more true to Ellul’s thought to perceive a relation of mutual criticism between his two lines of research in their respective totalities than to insist on one-to-one correlations between specific pairs of books. Not only did he regard more than one theological study as corresponding to each of his two

<sup>17</sup> Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 177.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 178.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 181.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182; cf. Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, chapter 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 183. (‘Technique’, for Ellul, is not equivalent to ‘technology’ and for that reason has an initial capital letter in the translation of *In Season, Out of Season*.)

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Ellul, ‘Mirror of These Ten Years: How My Mind Has Changed’, *Christian Century*, 87:7 (18 February 1970), 200–204 at 201. (In this article, Ellul describes his entire oeuvre as a ‘composition in counterpoint’.)

<sup>23</sup> Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 183.

books on Technique, but in his introduction to *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, he describes the book as an attempt ‘to set forth the dialectical position I can have in regard to society, human works, and especially technique’.<sup>24</sup>

On the sociological side, Ellul maintained that his analysis of Technique was one of the great orientations of his life. He advised that his life-long friend, Bernard Charbonneau, had grasped the significance of Technique as early as 1935 and then influenced him to develop his analysis of this phenomenon. For Ellul, Technique is not an isolated procedure or means of achieving some specific objective; rather, Technique comprises the totality of techniques, methods and procedures devised to achieve maximum efficiency in every sphere of life: ‘it might be said that technique is the translation into action of man’s concern to master things by means of reason, to account for what is subconscious, make quantitative what is qualitative, make clear and precise the outlines of nature, take hold of chaos and put order into it’.<sup>25</sup> Technique, then, is as much a mind-set as it is a social preoccupation with instruments, whether mechanical tools, intellectual methods or organizational procedures, a mentality that values utility and efficiency above all else. Ellul’s early books, *The Political Illusion* and *Propaganda*, attempt to articulate, respectively, the relation between Technique and politics and Technique and psychological influences.

While Ellul’s theological perspective was shaped largely by his reading of Karl Barth, his preoccupation with Technique suggests a comparison with that other giant of twentieth-century theology, Paul Tillich. In the introduction to a collection of Tillich’s writings on the ‘determining structures and decisive trends’ of twentieth-century western society, J. Mark Thomas writes: ‘Three powerful spiritual forces determine the contemporary religious situation: ‘mathematical natural science, technique and capitalist economy.’ This is how Paul Tillich interpreted the ‘spiritual situation’ of modernity in 1926 and throughout his intellectual life’.<sup>26</sup> However, while Tillich’s interest in social, cultural and economic questions led him to adopt what he called a ‘method of

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977), p. 13.

<sup>25</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 43. What Ellul called the ‘technical mentality’ corresponding to the ‘technical phenomenon’ has affinities with what members of the so-called Frankfurt School (Max Horkheimer, T. W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas) called ‘instrumental reason’. Goddard, *Living the Word*, pp. 126–53, provides an insightful discussion of Ellul’s conception of Technique and its socio-cultural significance.

<sup>26</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society*, ed. J. Mark Thomas (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988), p. xiii.

correlation',<sup>27</sup> Ellul adopted what he once described as a 'principle of confrontation',<sup>28</sup> particularly in relation to his research agenda. Tillich's method of correlation was intended to adapt the Christian message to the so-called modern mind, admittedly without diluting its distinctiveness, but for Ellul this smacked of compromise and conformity. While Tillich characterized his *Systematic Theology* as 'a help in answering questions', Ellul's theological perspective was shaped by his conviction that the Bible is 'the book of questions God asks us'.<sup>29</sup> He preferred to accentuate what Barth called the 'strange new world within the Bible',<sup>30</sup> thereby assisting it to collide with human preconceptions and religiosity.

In a recent text on method in theological reflection, Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward provide a typology of seven models of theological reflection.<sup>31</sup> These authors clearly consider a method of 'correlation' as most appropriate for public theology; chapter 5 is entitled "Speaking of God in Public': Correlation'. In their view:

The correlative method is one that emphasizes the importance of theology's engagement with contemporary culture, be that philosophical, aesthetic, political or scientific. This approach to theological reflection regards the evolution of Christian thought and practice as necessarily taking place *in public*: the Christian tradition should be prepared to engage in an open exchange of ideas and debate with different cultural disciplines, values, images and world-views.<sup>32</sup>

However, the authors contend that this particular model of theological reflection has two dimensions or strands, the apologetic and the dialectical.<sup>33</sup> The apologetic dimension engages with aspects of contemporary culture with a view to demonstrating that Christian faith provides answers to pressing questions of the day, whereas the dialectical dimension recognizes that expressions of con-

<sup>27</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (London: SCM Press, 1978), pp. 59–66.

<sup>28</sup> Ellul, 'Mirror of These Ten Years', 201.

<sup>29</sup> Ellul, *In Season, Out of Season*, p. 73.

<sup>30</sup> Karl Barth, 'The Strange New World within the Bible', *The Word of God and the Word of Man* [*Das Wort Gottes und die Theologie* (1925)], trans. Douglas Horton (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), chapter 2.

<sup>31</sup> Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005).

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138 (original italics).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 139. (The dialectical strand of the correlational method should not be confused with what Ellul meant by dialectic and its role in theological discourse.)

temporary culture may contribute to theological analysis and understanding in their own right.

After providing an overview of Tillich's method of correlation, Graham, Walton and Ward echo Seward Hiltner's critique of this method as too simplistic, particularly in so far as it places Christian theology in too privileged a position with respect to cultural concerns. In short, Tillich's method of correlation is too apologetic, too concerned to demonstrate the relevance of Christian thought. By contrast, the chastened correlational method of David Tracy incorporates a dialectical dimension into the relation between theology and cultural concerns, thereby accepting that in the dialogue between theology and culture, theology might have something to receive as well as to offer. According to Graham, Walton and Ward:

In this advocacy of a public theology Tracy brings together the two strands of the correlational model: (i) the apologetic, or an attempt to give a coherent account of Christianity in terms accessible to its cultural context; (ii) the dialectical, insisting on theology's openness to renewal from secular insights by virtue of their grounding in common human experience.<sup>34</sup>

These authors acknowledge that the method of correlation, whether solely apologetic or both apologetic and dialectical, is open to serious challenges, including that it too easily interprets theology along cultural lines and leaves unresolved the question of the normative status of Christian theology.<sup>35</sup> These are not criticisms usually levelled against Ellul, who was no less concerned to interrelate theological and cultural concerns than Tillich or Tracy and whose thinking was no less public, contextual and dialectical.

On the theological side of Ellul's two-stream research agenda, his primary concern was to formulate a Christian ethic based on a biblically informed theology, a project that if completed would have comprised eight volumes. In his preface to *The Ethics of Freedom*, he discloses a plan for a three-part ethic

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., pp. 160–61. (Tillich scholars may well think that this description of Tillich's method lacks necessary nuance, especially in light of his detailed give-and-take with aspects of contemporary culture. On Tracy's concept of a 'critical correlation' between his proposed two principal sources for Christian theology, Christian texts and common human experience/language, see Part 1 of his *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975; Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996). Thanks to Graeme Garrett and Thorwald Lorenzen for clarifying comments on Tillich and Tracy.)

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 167–8.

based on the apostle Paul's three theological virtues of faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13): 'it seems to me that hope corresponds to an ethics of freedom, faith to an ethics of holiness, and love to an ethics of relationship'.<sup>36</sup> Ellul failed to elucidate the precise nature of these respective correspondences, as Goddard points out,<sup>37</sup> but perhaps the more important point is Ellul's conviction that each of these central theological virtues needs to be 'fleshed out' ethically in relation to the wider world. Of the projected eight books, Ellul published the first part of his introduction to ethics, *To Will & To Do*, as well as *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, the corresponding *Ethics of Freedom* and *Living Faith*. His proposed *Ethics of Holiness*, corresponding to *Living Faith*, was written (a thousand-page manuscript exists), but not (as yet) published. So far as I know, the second part of his introduction to ethics was never written, nor were his books on love and the corresponding *Ethics of Relationship*.

Like Barth, Ellul failed to complete his major theological venture. For those who have learned vital lessons from Ellul, this truncation is frustrating. From another perspective, however, it is apposite that this project remains incomplete. My guess is that to have completed his Christian ethic may, for Ellul, have seemed too much like having the last word. This would have been contrary to the dialectical character of his thought, which always allowed for another word, a challenge, a 'nevertheless'.

More importantly, Ellul's biblical and theological writings were written within the framework of deliberate, studied interaction with key dimensions of his socio-political and cultural context. He noted that his ethical works were written to fill what he regarded as a serious lacuna in Barth's ethical writings. Early in a brief article entitled 'Karl Barth and Us', Ellul acknowledges that 'Barth endures, not as a historical block of work that we can admire like Saint Thomas or Abelard, but as a current resource for continual theological research'.<sup>38</sup> Yet Ellul ends this article by writing of the meaning Barth's work has for his thought, which he characterizes as the principles of freedom and universal salvation together with a mission with two aspects, both of which pertain to public theology. Of the first aspect of the 'mission', he writes: 'I had the impression that the ethical consequences of Barth's theology had never been elicited. I was not satisfied with his volumes of ethics and politics, which seemed to be based on an insufficient knowledge of the world and of poli-

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Goddard, *Living the Word*, p. 110.

<sup>38</sup> Jacques Ellul, 'Karl Barth and Us', *Sojourners*, 7:12 (December 1978), 22–4 at 22.

tics'.<sup>39</sup> Here Ellul signals that Christian ethics, especially Christian social ethics, must be acquainted closely with the situation as it is in the wider world. Otherwise, Christian ethical reflection can hardly be expected to make any meaningful impact in the public sphere. This is not to say that Christian ethics should merely parrot ethical discourse in the wider world, but rather that its content should disclose close and careful analysis of the socio-cultural context in which it offers moral vision and deliberation.

The second aspect of the 'mission' that Ellul perceives in Barth's thought relates to Barth's capacity to theologize dialectically. For Ellul, theologians of his generation need to be able to take up what they discern to be meaningful and good in Barth's legacy and to go beyond it in the same way that Barth was able to draw meaningfully from both sides of 'liberal-orthodox' conflict and transcend that dichotomy. Ellul indicates that he did not act on this aspect of the mission he perceived in Barth's work, 'since it was specifically theological'.<sup>40</sup> Yet remarks made earlier in his article suggest that by adopting a dialectical mode of thought, he did in fact take up this Barthian challenge in his own work. The crucial paragraph reads:

We saw, slowly and with difficulty, that this change [brought about by Barth's theology] originated from a new way of thinking as well as a new way of reading the Bible. At that period we scarcely spoke of a dialectic. We knew little of Hegel (who was scarcely in fashion in 1930), and little more of Marx. I had the greatest difficulty in understanding Barth's steps in thinking, always posing opposites and then going beyond them and synthesizing them in a new development—all of this not as an intellectual game, but because one was situated precisely at the existential level, where life itself unfolded.<sup>41</sup>

### **Dialectic as Method in Public Theology**

The term 'dialectic' is one Ellul used to describe his mode of thought. To understand Ellul one must appreciate the dialectical bent of his mind; otherwise one comes away from reading him either frustrated or confused. Perhaps

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 24. (I take Ellul's point, but there is a theological depth dimension to Barth's ethics that cannot be dismissed as being out of touch with the real world. His theological-ethical responses to World War I, Nazism, nuclear weapons and the unequal distribution of wealth reveal a person closely in touch with socio-political realities.)

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 23.

the simplest explanation of dialectical thinking he offered is that ‘dialectics is a procedure that does not exclude contraries, but includes them’.<sup>42</sup> Despite various nuances of the term in the history of philosophy, Ellul claimed to have derived his understanding of dialectic from the Bible.

What follows responds to Ellul’s reflections on the theme of dialectic in *What I Believe*,<sup>43</sup> a book he was apparently asked to write for a broad public audience.<sup>44</sup> His discussion of dialectic comprises the fourth of seven chapters in Part 1 of the book, subtitled ‘Various Beliefs’. Yet this chapter was not written for this book; an almost identical version first appeared in 1981 as Ellul’s response to a collection of essays on his thought entitled *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*.<sup>45</sup> There he notes: ‘I have no response to make to the criticisms [of contributors]. I listen to them and try to enter into the point of view or perspective of those who have formulated them in order to advance my own research along the lines indicated’.<sup>46</sup> Despite his alleged independence of thought, here Ellul underscores the importance both of empathic listening to the voice of others and of allowing other voices to impinge on his research and reflection.

This is not the sense everyone gains from reading Ellul, whose style, as noted above, is strident and uncompromising, full of invective and caustic hyperbole. This might help to explain his relative neglect in current discourse that goes by the name of public theology, in which public dialogue is both valued and sought. In any case, a willingness to listen with care to contrary or even contradictory, no less than to similar or sympathetic, voices prevents solipsism—a perennial temptation for theology—and also provides the opportunity for new levels of understanding to be reached. ‘In a dialogue’, Ellul writes, ‘listeners reconsider their own positions in the light of what they hear. They thus reach a new stage’.<sup>47</sup> Theology concerned with public engagement and social responsibility does well to take this on board. Careful, that is, care-

<sup>42</sup> Ellul, *Perspectives on Our Age*, p. 7.

<sup>43</sup> Jacques Ellul, *What I Believe*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), pp. 29–46.

<sup>44</sup> See Daniel B. Clendenin, ‘An Interview with Jacques Ellul’, *Media Development*, 35:2 (1988), 26–30 at 27; asked about *Ce que je crois* (Grasset & Fasquelle, 1987), Ellul responds: ‘It’s one of a series of books, all with the same title and by different authors, on ‘what I believe’.’

<sup>45</sup> Jacques Ellul, ‘Epilogue: On Dialectic’, in Christians and Van Hook, eds, *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays*, pp. 291–308.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 291.

<sup>47</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*, p. 29.

filled, listening to those voices in the public sphere able to shed light on critical issues and concerns is a necessary first (and perhaps even second and third) step. In this respect, public theology is less a theology of the word (proclamation and pronouncement) than a theology of attentiveness and reflection. It is theology characterized by discernment, especially in relation to the question of when and where it should speak out and when and where it should remain intentionally (as opposed to passively) silent. This is not a simple matter, especially since it is impossible to know in advance the precise nature of the when and the where and therefore what an appropriate response might be. Dialectical public theology eschews the notion that it has ready-made answers to questions of public import filed away for ready access in a top drawer or doctrinal tome.

Ellul's indebtedness to the thinking of the two Karls—Marx and Barth—has already been noted, but it is a matter of some interest that he explains the centrality of dialectic for his mode of thinking by referring to these two mentors: 'Since my two intellectual origins are with Marx and Barth, dialectic is central for me'.<sup>48</sup> For Ellul, dialectic is not primarily a means of describing the historical process, as for Marx, although the middle part of his book on 'The Human Adventure' does envision history dialectically (albeit more in the spirit of Toynbee than Marx).<sup>49</sup> Neither is his theology dialectical in the sense of Barth's early dialectical phase; yet it is similar to both Marx and Barth in that he recognizes the value of the challenge of something other, whether that other be mundane (as in Marx) or transcendent (as in Barth).

Fully appreciative of the many and varied ways in which the term 'dialectic' has been used in the history of philosophy, Ellul shuns any general theory of dialectic. Rather, he begins with an etymological observation: 'Dialectic comes from the Greek *dialogein* [sic], 'to talk with,' as in 'dialogue.' But the *dia* also carries the sense of distance or contradiction'.<sup>50</sup> In other words, dialogue entails both presence (being with, so as to be able to talk together) and distance (being apart, so as to be able to contribute something different). In relation to public theology, we might conceive of presence as public engagement or social responsibility and distance as theological integrity, that is, critical faithfulness to Scripture and Christian tradition. Both presence and distance are important: presence without distance might well imply accommodation; distance without presence might well imply irrelevance.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>49</sup> See *ibid.*, pp. 97 and 122.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 30; perhaps he meant *dialogomai*.

In this connection, one is reminded of the work of Douglas John Hall, particularly his reflections on *The Cross in Our Context*.<sup>51</sup> This work is a kerygmatic apology for a *theologia crucis* as the most authentically Christian and contextually necessary theological stance in the present time. In a chapter entitled ‘Engaging the World’, Hall avers:

The object of the Christian presence in the world—of discipleship—is to *engage* the world. A Christian community is not engaging the world when it merely *reflects* the world. By itself, proximity to the world, conformity to its standards and values, achieves nothing by way of worldly engagement. A religious body may be wonderfully accessible, open to its host culture, even manifesting a high degree of involvement with the great problems of the age and with those most victimized by those problems—in short, very much *in* the world. Yet it will not engage that world unless it remembers and in some degree embodies an alternative that is not already present in the world, at least in any obvious way. The obverse is also true, of course: neither will the world be engaged if, while guarding vigilantly that which makes it other than, or different from, the world, a religious body refuses to enter its world with sufficient abandon to arouse the world’s interest or curiosity. In biblical terms, the disciple community is called to be *in* the world yet not *of* the world—or (to turn the dialectic on its other end and so get both emphases straight in their essential tension and suggestiveness) not *of* the world, but most decidedly *in* it.<sup>52</sup>

Albeit couched in the language of communitarian discipleship and mission, Hall’s remarks apply also to the discourse of public theology. Indeed, one might even contend that in so far as Christian public theology exhibits this peculiar dialectic, it comprises a particular mode of discipleship and mission.

Ellul challenges inflexible notions of non-contradiction, indeed, any rational principle according to which opposites cancel out each other. He suggests that just as there can be a dialectic of ideas, in which thought is stimulated by being confronted with opposite points of view, so there may be a dialectic of reality, or at least of apprehending reality: ‘Dialectic... is not just a way of

<sup>51</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 56 (original italics). Those familiar with Ellul’s early work, *The Presence of the Kingdom* (1948), will detect in these remarks (apparently unintentional) echoes of Ellul’s depiction of the Christian’s role in the world. Ellul’s preface to the second edition of this book makes plain that it was an exercise in dialectical public theology. See Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd edn (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989), pp. vii–xiv.

reasoning by question and answer. It is an intellectual way of grasping reality, which embraces the positive and negative'.<sup>53</sup> As a result, since reality as we know it incorporates incompatibilities without them cancelling each other out, one's way of thinking about reality ought to enable one to hold together incompatible elements without excluding one or other dimension. The interaction between two (or more) incompatible elements is what counts, not static or chronic opposition between elements, or abolishment of one by another.

In Ellul's view, time and history are integral to dialectic: 'Dialectic has often been viewed as a type of reasoning or as the coexistence of contradictory elements. The important point, however, is that the contradictory factors cannot exist without eliminating one another *unless they are correlative in a temporal movement that leads to a new situation*'.<sup>54</sup> These remarks lead Ellul to consider Marx's dialectical understanding of history, which he regards as fruitful. Yet he also points out that in and of themselves, contradictory factors do not necessarily have dialectical value; only some contradictory factors advance the dialectical process.

The question arises: Might the church or church's thinking constitute a 'contradictory factor' that advances the dialectical process? The history of the church's relation to wider society gives one pause. Certainly the nature and quality of the church's relation to society warrant careful reflection, but the pluralist context within which the western church now finds itself suggests that it would be wise to abandon any notion of being in charge, a concept more difficult to come to terms with in some church traditions than in others. It would also seem appropriate to discontinue baptizing or rubber-stamping social, cultural, political, economic or ideological initiatives from outside the church. This need not mean that the church should oppose such initiatives; but when such initiatives can be affirmed as compatible with the church's own theological vision, perhaps the best stance might simply be to acknowledge that point. This already occurs. For its part, the church has sufficient resources to offer, at appropriate times, something distinctly its own. At other times, the church may have nothing distinctive to say, or it may have something distinctive to say that is either incomprehensible or objectionable to a wider public, in which case silence may be the best that the church can offer. Silence may not seem a promising means of engaging in public dialogue, but it is more likely to leave open the possibility of conversation than either force or shrill

<sup>53</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*, p. 31.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32 (my italics).

fulmination, counterproductive means all too often used in times past when the church commanded greater societal influence.

Ellul proceeds to discuss two aspects of a dialectical mode of reasoning that are important for him: the ‘positivity of negativity’ and the inevitability of crisis. With respect to the ‘positivity of negativity’, a phrase adopted from Hegel, Ellul states:

Negativity is essential, for if the positive remains alone, it is unchanged, stable, and inert. A positive element, for example, an unchallenged society, a force without counterforce, a person engaged in no dialogue, an unstimulated professor, a church without heretics, a sole party with no rivals, is enclosed within the permanent repetition of its own image. It will be satisfied with what it has done thus far and will see no reason to change.<sup>55</sup>

To Ellul’s various examples above, one might add theology. Theology closed in on itself too easily becomes sterile, not so much because of a paucity of resources internal to itself but because those who engage in theology all too readily stick to well-worn paths. The great challenges to theology posed by intellectual upheavals in science, philosophy, sociology, economics, political theory and psychology over the past half-millennium, but especially since the Enlightenment, have not only undermined its hegemony in the intellectual sphere but also enriched theology by forcing it to revisit its presuppositions and to re-conceive its proper task and function. For this reason, even the most severe critique of theology is to be welcomed as a stimulus to reconsider and to refine.<sup>56</sup>

If criticism from outside of theology is, in fact, welcome, what might this imply about the role of the public (or different publics) within which a publicly engaged and socially responsible theology intends to participate? First, public concerns are also theological concerns, not simply because church and society overlap but because the God concerning whom Christian theology reflects and speaks creates and sustains all, loves all and reaches out to all. In short, the God of Christian theology is not a Christian god. For this theological reason, public concerns are also theological concerns.

Secondly, the public (or publics) with whom public theology is concerned is a conversation partner for theology, a partner that is sometimes friendly and

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>56</sup> See Winifred Wing Han Lamb, *Living Truth—Truthful Living: Christian Faith and the Scalpel of Suspicion* (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2004).

sometimes hostile. Yet whether friendly or hostile, those outside of theology offer a negativity, challenge or contradiction that helps to protect theology from solipsism and sclerosis. In this respect, theology has cause to be grateful for an unbelieving or at least sceptical public.

Thirdly, in the providence of God, the wider world—the public with a capital P—is sometimes well ahead of the church and its theologians. This can be, and often is, overstated, but there are times when the church must listen rather than speak, learn rather than instruct. This sort of posture is all too difficult unless one accepts, dialectically, the ‘positivity of negativity’.

Since dialectic presupposes challenge and/or contradiction, Ellul also reflects on how something new emerges from this confrontation. This transition he describes as a ‘crisis’, whether in the realm of ideas or in history. From his brief discussion, it would seem that Ellul regards each and every transition emerging from a challenge or contradiction as inevitably explosive and destructive. In this respect, his understanding of dialectic is perhaps not so helpful for thinking about method in public theology. There are times, perhaps because of obvious overlaps between social and theological concerns, when the conversation between theology and the wider public is both amicable and transformative. Nevertheless, Ellul was correct that no transition, however transformative, is final; it is simply another stage in an ongoing process or conversation, and not necessarily a higher stage. According to Ellul: ‘In the historical and social field we call this crisis *revolution*, in the spiritual field we call it *conversion*. If the dialectic is dealing with reality, we see that neither conversion nor revolution is ever once and for all. Both constantly have to begin again’.<sup>57</sup> Seen in this light, public theology is pilgrim theology, ever ready to move on to new understanding or, at times, to move back to re-examine basics.

While Ellul’s appreciation for a dialectical mode of thought is undoubtedly indebted to key figures in the western philosophical and theological tradition, especially Marx and Barth, he maintains that dialectic is an aspect of the biblical tradition, beginning with the eighth-century Hebrew prophets. He does not mean that biblical writers used dialectic in any self-conscious way, but rather that certain dimensions of biblical thought could not but be formulated dialectically. In support of this contention, he offers five illustrations of biblical dialectic: the biblical affirmation that the transcendent God accompanies a peculiar people within mundane history; the dialectic of promise and fulfilment, with fulfilment containing within itself a new promise awaiting

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<sup>57</sup> Ellul, *What I Believe*, p. 35 (original italics).

further fulfilment; the paradoxical relation between the whole and a remnant, in which the remnant represents the whole more wholly than the whole itself could (humanity—Israel—the Isaianic remnant—Jesus as ‘new Adam’); the Pauline dialectic of grace and works (cf. Eph. 2:8 and Phil. 2:12–13), together with the dialectic of the eschatological ‘already/not yet’ widely evidenced within the New Testament; and the dialectical relation between history and the *parousia*, in which history does not lead inevitably to the reign of God but neither does God’s reign simply erase, but rather recapitulates, history.<sup>58</sup>

Daniel Clendenin points out that in addition to these examples of biblical dialectic, Ellul adopts a dialectical hermeneutic with respect to the biblical themes of law, the state, money and the world. In connection with the last of these themes, the world, Clendenin dismisses the all too common judgment that Ellul is pessimistic toward the world on the basis that it overlooks his dialectical interpretation of Scripture’s affirmation that the world is both lost as a consequence of human rebellion and also irrevocably loved by the Creator. ‘Those who neglect the dialectic’, he writes, ‘either baptize the world without discrimination or categorically condemn it and withdraw—neither of which, according to Ellul, does justice to the text’.<sup>59</sup>

Whatever one makes of Ellul’s use of biblical idioms in support of his contention that dialectic is represented in biblical theology, what he affirms about dialectic as a mode of thought is valuable because it points to a mind-set that is able to grapple with complexity and paradox. This is invaluable in public theology because the conversation between theology and the wider public often takes place in the absence of shared assumptions and values. At best, one might hope for thin agreement between theology and its public interlocutors; rarely will there be thick agreement on the basis of shared assumptions and values grounded in a commonly affirmed tradition, that is, Christian faith. As a result, public theologians must find their comfort zone within a conversational space in which most of their presuppositions or first principles are contested. In such circumstances, to appreciate the genuine value of difference, challenge, contradiction—in a word, negativity—and to be able to hold incompatible or irresolvable concepts or perspectives in dialectical tension is more likely to produce creative outcomes and to be more edifying for all concerned.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., pp. 35–42.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel B. Clendenin, ‘Introduction’ to Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd edn, p. xxxvi.

In a staunchly secular society, Ellul learned the Marxist language and framework of thought shared by leading French intellectuals so as to be able to speak meaningfully, yet also critically, into his social situation and circumstances. His theology was formed in dialogue with his cultural context, yet not at the expense of diluting its distinctiveness and inner integrity. With courage, passion and insight, he sought not only to elucidate the underlying mechanisms of his socio-cultural environment and their ramifications but also to speak a discerning and transforming word grounded in a theology oriented to comprehending God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ as liberating news for the world. In part, this is because Ellul was able to discern within Marxist analysis and vision features that resonated or cohered with his understanding of Christian faith. His was a truly revolutionary presence, and his literary legacy contains resources for public theology that deserve to be retrieved.