

Looking for an Alternative

The verb in this title is the present participle. It's put that way to reflect an ongoing search as well as to represent a persistent uncertainty many of us have when it comes to the ultimates in life. "Looking" represents our inherent restlessness and "alternative" represents an option, albeit presently vague, but hopefully better than what we have at present. Most of the time we can't put our fingers on this restlessness despite being fully aware of its presence. Actually, I found it difficult to come up with a title for the subject matter at hand, so I settled more or less randomly on this one. At the same time I desired to avoid something catch, so let it stand as is. What's more important, of course, is the content. With this in mind and without further ado, let's get into the matter at hand.

With the exception of some disaster at the last moment, this year 2020 of the good Lord has been one of considerable tumult¹. It has just about everything one would expect as released from Pandora's box: not just a pandemic but a rebound which is more deadly than the first one, racial unrest, soaring unemployment, one hurricane after another, raging forest fires, mistrust of each other and even talk of civil war. Then, of course, we can throw in a contentious presidential election which looks like it won't be resolved easily. However, one wonders how disastrous all this really is despite the obvious pain and hardship involved. If you look outside, the sun continues to shine while on the local level where we live, we move and have our being as things go along pretty much as usual. The immediate impact facing us all is the universal use of face masks which by now has become fashionable. At the same time just about everyone acknowledges that the media is taking great delight in the social unrest. Without minimizing the impact in certain areas, the consensus is universal: the greater the impact of Covid 19's rebound, the more delight the media has in all this. So despite incessant dire reports we get, most people still have their two feet firmly planted on the ground.

All this is transpiring against a background where most if not all of us have been raised within a tradition with values easily recognizable and acknowledged by other folks. These values had served earlier generations admirably but now have run out of steam leaving us, the current generation still clinging to them, stranded high and dry. The suddenness with which this has happened is astounding, and still we're coming to grips with it. Now in a time of uncertainty and reckoning we can assess how our respective traditions are shepherding us through the current crises. On the micro level everything seems more or less in good working order, but in the larger culture things appear otherwise with so many crises looming over our heads. Perhaps the parable of seeds thrown on fertile soil, sand or rock has some relevance here with regard to our personal values. That's for each of us to decide.

¹ This article is composed mostly throughout the month of November.

Thus the year 2020 is one full of questions ¹. Towards the end of 2019 and beginning of the new year the very name and even sound 2020 sounded promising. It had a nice balance of two 20's and better, suggestive of 20/20 vision. As the year progressed, a lot of people made fun of all this in a bitter sort of way, but that came to an early end ². Now most of us look forward to moving beyond it. However, we with our penchant for instantaneous solutions are faced with something over the long haul.

Somewhere along the line—I can't recall when, let alone the exact circumstances—I came across reference to a French philosophy named Jacques Ellul (+1994). The article I read had tagged him with the rather dubious “Christian anarchist” which sounded so 1960's-ish. That came close to turning me off except for the striking title of a book for which he's famous, **The Technological Society**. Another turn-off which came close to doing the same thing was Ellul being a French philosopher. That evoked abstract, long-winded presentations which otherwise could be expressed simply. However, there was something attractive about the word *technique* that caught my attention, expressive by its very French-ness. And so this led to the next step, reading his book, by no means an easy task. Soon it was backed up by another about him which to my surprise I found quite good. Reading the two at once proved to be a happy choice that came rather unexpectedly.

It isn't the purpose to discuss Ellul here except for bringing to the fore one of his basic insights which I may not be interpreting properly. However, the definition of *technique* as lifted from his writings serves as an important take-off point for the article at hand: “The totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given stage of development) in every field of human activity.” My limited and admittedly imperfect grasp of this? That today's technological society has as its goal...its only goal...the summoning and marshaling of any and all resources to produce a desired result. The means of getting there is It, nothing more, nothing less. Once we're locked into It, things move on to yet another stage and so forth indefinitely. The connections are of less important than their focused concentration which is endowed with a power that cannot be curbed. In fact, it gets stronger...amasses strength...as it moves along. Humans, of course, got the ball rolling but once it's underway, they're pretty much irrelevant except for an occasional tweaking of the system here and there. Ellul might be a bit too early for any scary cyborg Terminator stuff, but it's easy for us to make the connection though I'm not sure he would. Again, *technique* is

1 As already noted, one has to really wonder if things are as bad as they are compared with other periods in history. Ours differs from all others in one important way. That is, the instantaneous knowledge we have about what's transpiring in any corner of the globe. Such immediacy can compound existing problems beyond what they actually are.

2 Before continuing, please note that this article may overlap with several others on this homepage. In a nutshell, what emerges later on concerns the difference of approaches to religion, namely, between West and East. Sooner or later anyone with skin in the game has to address this issue. No getting around the matter. It's where the battle is really being fought even though we're largely unaware of it. You don't have to be a professional scholar or the like to see this.

focused on getting the job done asap. Obviously more jobs are out there, and *technique* will make a go at them until it brings everything under its domain.

A common, personal experience with regard to all this if I may interject it here. Consider when we're working with an electronic device, notably a computer or a smart phone. These devices are designed with one end in mind, to make available information to us on which we then may work. After all, they are tools. While we acknowledge this, consider those occasions when we run into problems accessing a given program or downloading a file. They devour us in a way that's so absolute it's almost frightening. Attention is taken away from the primary task at hand (writing a document, for example) and shifted on to what makes the device work. Now we're focused on getting the device to function properly; our personal work is literally gone with the wind. Perhaps the next day we may regroup and start again, but often it takes twenty-four hours to get this out of our system.

Apart from a real problem at hand, admittedly involvement with *technique* as manifested through a computer problem can be fun. Our energy is focused upon the process of upgrading or the like, for it gives us a sense of purpose, of accomplishing something. Should we look at this more closely, the device—not ourselves—is getting itself in better order while we are not. In a real sense, we are being diminished. Once the problem has been solved, we return to the work for which the device had been made. Yes, strange to say it can be difficult to get back into the swing of things, and we find ourselves surprised at this. During the process of return we experience a tinge of nostalgia for the time we had spend dilly-dallying with the download, upgrade or whatever had occupied our time. When we return to our work, we do so reluctantly, even wishing we could put it off in favor of continuing to tinker with the device. Such is surprisingly strong hold of *technique* through the medium of a mechanical device. It has become an end in itself, not at the service of our work. Secretly we enjoy it yet must move on even if the value of our work has been diminished, albeit slightly. This may be fine here and there, but when it occurs again, the increments which have been built up have a negative impact.

As far as *technique* goes, Ellul points out that from the beginning of human history it has been present, for example, as the invention of a crude spear. The major difference between then which much of human history and now is that a tacit respect had existed between the creator and the created. The tool or the means never became the end-all as we have it today. This relationship points to the role our faculty of memory plays, of keeping the two separate yet in balance. Should we ignore the history of such a relationship we lay open the possibility that the place of the tool will dominate us and we become like it, a means to an end which if asked what it consisted of, wouldn't be able to provide an answer. That makes us just as dumb if not more dumb than the tool, especially when strange to say, we worship it. This idolatrous attitude sounds ridiculous and indeed is but well within the realm of possibility.

As so *technique* is directly in conflict with genuine religious practice by failing to acknowledge a reverence connecting the creator and created as elaborated by rites and rituals present since the dawn of history. While those who have made the tool know they are gods, readily they acknowledge that the power to have done so comes not from them but from an external (divine) source. An approximate guess as to when this reverence, so central to our constitution as human beings, began to be lost and assumed a modern, recognizable form is around the advent of the Industrial Revolution. However, *technique* as we've come to know it must have been in the mind of some people beforehand or at least the steps to launch this new era even if not clear to them at the time. What got underway was the gradual disappearance of what it means to be a human being who had fabricated the device. This doesn't disappear overnight but gradually as the fabricator becomes more and more a hindrance to a given end. One can't but help wonder if the disappearance will be absolute, this being the realm of science fiction. At this juncture it sure looks that way as *technique* moves forward relentlessly while human instrumentality regresses. Nevertheless, the human agent, that is, we ourselves, hang in there as battered bystanders.

This brief outline of Ellul's insight into *technique* as I've come to understand it has some relevance to the overall theme of the article at hand. Although *technique* always has been with us, indeed necessary for survival, it started to get out of hand some two hundred years ago with the advent of the above mentioned Industrial Revolution. Without actually realizing it, we've been trained...more as indoctrinated incrementally...to see the means to an end as the end in and by itself. This has put us on the move but in a restless sort of way, and not on a path which you'd call as one of discovery. Attention upon the means has assumed a life of its own which consumes all our energies. We don't know how to stop and appraise the situation. A road map is useless except for the task of laying down the next mile of the road which is done automatically (or should we say mindlessly?). We may think that this advancement is part of some grand plan, even divinely inspired, but quickly discover it isn't. The reason? The process is humorless and consumes every ounce of our energy. If some divine force were at work, the drive wouldn't be relentless and unyielding but much softer and gentler even if demanding as the Bible reveals when God intervenes in the lives of people.

At the time of writing this article or towards the end of the year 2020 Ellul's ideas about *technique* seem to have taken on greater significance, indeed, in a dramatic fashion. The sudden rise of Covid 19, a pandemic in the true sense of the word (i.e., as all-the-people) has affected every corner of the globe. The virus seems to be nature's way of rising up again the relentless application of *technique*, and we're left pretty much clueless that this might be the case. Instead, we channel our ignorance to divine punishment; perhaps containing a grain of truth but not the whole picture. If Ellul were alive today, what would he think? However, objectively this idea of revenge but with the end to bring about a cure makes sense and perhaps will come into greater clarity in the near future. Just consider the sharp contrast between life shortly before Covid 19 took hold and a few months later, all this within recent

memory. We've been hard at work or allowing *technique* to organize everything and put it within our grasp to achieve some nebulous end, all the while ignorant that the means has been consuming us. Actually the pandemic started ages ago, Covid 19 being simply the latest version. At last we're starting to see our mistaken path of focusing upon the means of achieving a result instead of seeing it as just that, a means. And that means can be slowed down, altered or maybe even done away with altogether. Still we haven't quite gotten there and are flailing about helplessly. We're starting to realize that our energies have been marshaled for the sake of being marshaled, nothing more. If one can't find humor in this situation (and really it's quite funny) all is lost.

Shifting gears a bit which is more towards the goal of this article, realization that the pain we're experiencing right now could herald a shift away from *technique* as Jacques Ellul has presented it. Instead, we're forced into a position to account for what we had before—way before the emergence of modern *technique*—when focus was upon the person, not the means. This, of course, was in imitation of the gods' relationship with human beings. Where this modern day battle is assuming new form is the frantic pace at which a vaccine for Covid 19 is going on. Let's say a vaccine is developed (it seems to be the case as of this writing) and Covid 19 is banished forever. Then what? Chances are we'd go right back to where we left off. Time to crank up *technique* and let it rip. However, nature doesn't seem to have that in mind. Of course, at this juncture a lot is pure speculation in a universal desire to return to normal.

Perhaps at this juncture insight into being a pilgrim or sojourner might help to offset the relentless push of *technique*. Covid 19 has given rise to this sentiment due to a renewed sense of fragility. That's what the real issue is about regardless of how it's painted. Actually this pilgrim thing has been a part of human culture from all around the world as far back as we can remember. People were acutely aware of their mortality, far more than today, and this compelled them to appreciate the transitory nature of existence. Also people felt they were moving to some better state of existence beyond the present one, perfectly natural due to the grim circumstances of life in general. Despite attempts to somehow halt this passage of time (monumental structures such the pyramids are typical of this), they too are destined to fall away even if their ultimate demise is several million years in the future. Now if we were to insert the idea of *technique* into this situation, most people would either shrug or laugh it off. Everyone appreciates usefulness, but it takes second place when you're on the move to a place other than where you're at right now.

Being a pilgrim, a stranger-upon-the-earth, might offset the way Covid 19 has affected the practice of religion, regardless of which faith we embrace. Most established churches have transitioned to virtual services. While the technology for doing this is no especially new, the widespread use is a new phenomenon. Usually religion is practiced in person, not remotely, hence the novelty, even somewhat alien feel to all this. However, most people will agree it's better than nothing, especially for those who are more restricted. Now in late

2020 with a resurgence in the pandemic, such virtual religious practices may continue longer than first imagined. About half a year's experiment with it is bringing up the larger question of whether religious practices as we've known them have any value or are of the same value as held until recently. Catholics seem to be having a particularly difficult time. Celebration of the sacraments, notably the Mass, is essential, and to be deprived of them is being deprived of...well...oxygen to breathe. Virtual Masses are a substitute but not the real thing because you can't receive the physically consecrated bread and wine. "Spiritual communion" is the phrase heard most often in this regard. Obviously the verdict on all this is still out.

No doubt about it. The pandemic we're experiencing was quick to shed fresh light on the actual practice of religion perhaps as never beforehand. This brings to mind an apparently unmitigated disaster that altered the direction of Judaism. That was the destruction of the Jerusalem temple by the Romans which altered forever religious practice. Until that fateful year of seventy or so Jews had their religious attention focused upon sacrifices made in the Jerusalem temple. Now it was gone once and for all without the hint of restoration as had been the case with past disasters. Some elements were already present that made that possible, waiting to manifest themselves as that historical trauma revealed. So without missing a beat Jews shifted their worship to the Torah which involved cultivation of an ethic devoted to study, this lasting to the present day.

As for the restrictions placed on more sacramentally oriented religions such as Catholicism, they are felt more directly and could even threaten the primary means of worship which is the Mass. New restriction or in some instances complete absence of public assembly has led to a questioning people hadn't done before...or at least more openly. They're asking somewhat haltingly why they've been so tied up with observances which don't seem as pressing now. God remains God and *mirabile dictu*, still can be accessed. To have thought otherwise at an earlier time would have been the equivalent of heresy. Obviously such questions are asked in a delicate fashion plus fraught with some fear. However, just as the ancient Jews had present but unrealized ability to adapt after the Jerusalem temple's destruction, surely the same must apply to a religion where sacraments are paramount.

Taking a hard look at this phenomenon which has placed so many people in an awkward situation gives us better insight as to what religion is all about. It may not be something for which we signed on, but the new reality brought on by Covid 19 is forced upon us in an inescapable manner. With current age-old practices suspended, people are starting to question whether or not alternatives exist. At the same time we have to avoid jettisoning tried n' true ways of worship as a gesture of feigned maturity which underneath is a sign of immaturity. This would be the equivalent of attempting to end religion long, possible in the short term, not in the long term. Anyway, sooner or later anyone with skin in this particular game has to address that which is inevitable though perhaps not in the forefront of the concern of most people. That means the long held familiar distinction between West

and East. Always this issue had remained with us in the background. Now in a period of unprecedented questions, it comes forward whether we're ready or not. Indeed, it will come to light in a way not previously imagined, so we might as well welcome its emergence. Even then it will not be welcomed, even resisted strongly to the point of engaging in persecution.

So how can we approach this new urgency with regard to religion without abandoning our respective traditions and not following this whim or that? Since we live in real space and in real time, coming up with a proper image of our situation is helpful to orient us. A favorite personal one comes to mind as it does often in such circumstances, the way cats comport themselves when relaxed¹. Although considered highly neurotic and un-tamable, at times they just stand there looking around in a non-directional way, that is, without focusing upon a given object. This is deceptive, for at all times they are constantly attentive. You pick this up by the constantly twitching ears. Such an image can be representative of a state of mind which on the surface is idle but beneath is fully attentive. We know what this state is all about though often can't tap into such attentiveness in a conscious fashion. Usually it's not good to approach a cat when it's relaxed but let it alone and simply be in its presence which we sense is allowed by the cat, not by us. Should we disturb a cat's non-focused demeanor somehow we would be disturbing something deep within ourselves. Reading into it too much? Perhaps, but to let this image go by without consideration would be equivalent to letting an instructive image blow by as un-examined. Later on it just may make sense.

We can take this attitude of a cat being non-focused (again, beware of reading into it too much) and apply it to the more familiar one of watching or waiting which is found in most religious traditions. The reason why such attentiveness has a universal appeal is that it isn't tied down by any particular teaching or dogma. At the same time one is free to apply dogma to it. No person alive has gone without the experience of waiting. For one it can be painful and lonely whereas for another, a great delight. In the end, all that anyone can say is that it points to a transcendent reality larger than anyone of us. In fact, this turns out to be a kind of common denominator image which embraces all other descriptions of our innate desire for the transcendent once any others have run their usefulness. Always we're in a state of waiting. Furthermore, each person can tweak it a bit without doing damage to his or her belief system.

On a personal level, the roots to this watching took root when I was very young, the images of it being very much alive. Often I had visited animals at a local zoo. Over time I got to know many of them and they me. As soon as I made my presence known, quite a few would walk up to the fence with varying degrees of friendliness and curiosity. These visits had left a permanent impression. In later years many times I was bothered by what they

¹ Consider an article about cats in (of all places) the Wall Street Journal, November 12, 2020. It entitled *Cats are the Best Philosophers* by John Gray. Especially note "Their default state is contentment, to which they return whenever they are not hunting, mating or playing."

did all day while I went about my activities such as attending school, etc. They spend their entire lives in a confined area, some spaces larger than others, and basically just stood there. In fact, sometimes I'd leave while they kept an eye on me. Several minutes later I'd look around the corner to see what they were doing, almost expecting to see something extraordinary. To my disappointment they were simply standing there as when I had come on the scene, my visit being a slight interruption in their life-long mode of existence. It should be noted that in one way they were quite well off. They were well fed, cared for and didn't have to fend for themselves as in the wild.

Can this be what watching is all about? Does it somehow give rise to a protective environment? The answer is yes provided you're serious about opting for it which you do by seeing no other option in life. After all, it turns out that this is the ultimate option. While you're taken care of, nevertheless it's a steep price to pay. Doing it for a relatively short time is okay but permanently? That's a rhetorical question that can be answered only within oneself. It shows that the contrast between grasping an insight and making it permanent is very elusive yet necessary to nail down, so that we may extend it in space and time. It seems that never will the two be balanced completely which is how life works. However, it may be a sign of things to come or what happens when we're on the verge of passing off the scene. We'll find out sooner or later.

The common denominators of watching, hitting barriers we didn't expect and being a pilgrim with no lasting roots are reducible to One Thing. That may be described as a stripping action which if you analyze carefully, leaves us with an awareness that's simple and pure. This awareness is always with us but is obscured literally by countless filters, most of which are beneficial which precisely is the problem. We're engaged in essentially harmless activity. Regardless, they are filters which if not dealt with, can be troublesome. They assume various forms according to our respective religious tradition and regardless of content, are the rock-solid facts with which we have to work.

Once we've been reduced to such a state we can be certain of one thing. Never can we return to things-as-they-had-been. We've changed in a radical fashion that upends all our ideas about spirituality, even doubting whether from this point it's worthwhile pursuing. Such a doubt isn't really a doubt, paradoxically as that sounds. We're coming to grips with the fact that we're fashioned whole and entire with nothing lacking which means we have no work to do in order to improve ourselves. A very strange, even alien, situation indeed. In pre-pandemic days...not long ago indeed...such experiences may have been less common and discussed rarely if at all. Now that Covid 19 has changed everything, anyone who has gone through such an experience may not consider himself an odd duck for having allowed such thoughts to take root. It turns out that this is only the beginning.

And so we continue our lives resting on the only solid ground available to us which consists in being present to our inbuilt awareness. Actually we have no choice but to remain so, for

the multiple ways which conspire to reduce us as such leave no other option. I'm not sure if the parallel is accurate, but there seems to be one with Descartes' famous *cogito ergo sum*. As we all know, Descartes looked within himself for that which was most reliable and came up with his now famous dictum to describe his experience. The same seems equally applicable to the case at hand when we're reduced to just hanging around with no place to go and nothing to do. Perhaps Descartes saw this, and it frightened him so he didn't bother to record it. Just an after-thought. In our insight of coming up against the solid wall of awareness no one is present to hold our hand which may have been the case with other life changing experiences. It may feel awkward at first but closer examination reveals that we have no need for support. For the moment we may think as such, not unlike a persons whose arm has been amputated recently and tends to think it's there. Once this memory fades away, we know what it means to be set free or better, realize that we've had this freedom from The Beginning only haven't realized it. Like the ancient Israelites in the wilderness, we can simply go out in the field and pick up our daily quota of quails and manna. We don't have to dig nor pluck it, just bend down and fill our baskets.

It's the ease and natural way we comport ourselves that's so striking and in many aspects, a contrast to the religious and philosophical principles that have formed us. They remain embedded within our memory, of course, and perhaps will for the rest of our lives. Still, we've made a huge advance worth celebrating. We can look back on our more immediate past and see that we had been (for lack of a better word) reduced to a state of confusion. We're not responsible for having brought it about but somehow somewhere allowed it to befall us. If we wish to pinpoint it more, some calamitous humiliation might fit the bill. However, that's not the end but the beginning as anyone knows who had gone through this.

Armed with this new freedom unlike any other we've had we can appreciate more what it means to being made whole and entire. Clues to this wholeness seem more evident in the East rather than in Western religion, by that of course is meant as Christianity. I'm not sure if Hasidim falls into this category but does seem to lean more towards the East. What can be said with certainty is that it has flourished during so much persecution which reveals a vibrancy all its own. In fact, Hasidim may be the way to go for many of us Westerners, a kind of in-between state, that is, in-between the West and the East.

It seems that if you remain "normal" you miss out on a lot of this realization. Such is the benefit of Covid 19 which we'll appreciate over the long haul. Society tends to normalize people in certain ways which Ellul spells out through its use of propaganda. He specifies t his propaganda by allying it with *technique* which influences culture or perhaps better, by smothering it with that means-as-an-end world view demanding our conformity. Such demands are by no means bad but are limited, and we can tell they are so by that lack of freedom just noted. Instead we feel better if we're bound or compelled to act in a certain way which is what a norm is all about. Suffering is a key component to this belonging and

not to have it implies that something is wrong somewhere. A fix is required, hence the supposed value of our sufferings.

Perhaps on a more subtle level which can escape our attention is that our training—we could say our *paideia* or rearing from childhood into young adults—has been tied in with causality so much so that we're simply unaware of the connection. Such-and-such a cause had affected us in a particular way, and we're stuck memories of it. What's new about this? Nothing. It's common to everyone. No one seems satisfied unless engaged in some form of causality, that being another way of engaging in this or that ascetical practice. Admittedly we can relish this it in some strange way because it gives us satisfaction. In some instances this may have something to do with being a victim which hopefully will gain us sympathy. Because causality is so pervasive in our lives yet un-examined, it's extremely important and must be dealt with asap if we're to advance anywhere spiritually.

While consciously we may experience all sorts of thoughts about assessing this and that, a way of seeing ourselves in the world at large, underneath the solution is otherwise. Perhaps this is what the Zen folks are trying to communicate by what's dubbed non-intellection: "If only you would learn how to achieve a state of non-intellection, immediately the chain of causation would snap" (**The Zen Teaching of Huang Po**, New York, 1958, p. 88). This has an appeal so immediate and compelling you want to go out there and simply stop thinking...impossible, of course. That's why it strikes us to the core. It's held out as accessible by us at once while revealing of some deep, hidden part of ourselves that resonates so well with it.

Causation is something that's interconnected. We're influenced constantly by the opinions of people around us which includes the media. All conspire...breath-together...to bring about their own world views which don't necessarily concur with the one I might have. Expanding this special space is the task at hand. We have insight into it but need more in order to make it as continuous as possible. While in fact it is continuous, to our experience it isn't. Rather, it's a series of off-ons. The closer each off-on gets to the next, the less "bumpy" becomes our experience. A problem presents itself here. We know this to be true but lack the where-with-all to actually effect it. At least we know that we're grounded in reality both objectively and subjectively. When you get older, options are reduced but if you've trained yourself earlier, dividends come later. This turns out to be the only thing we have and can work with, so might as well run with it.

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