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Sample Admission Essay- Turabian Style

The Bible Seminary

Prompt: *Write an essay in which you identify one influential Protestant scholar OR one influential Roman Catholic scholar, who thrived during the 20th century. In your essay, provide a brief overview of their most significant contributions to Christian scholarship and explain why you chose them. Your essay should be 500–1000 words in length and cite at least three scholarly sources.*

Jacques Ellul (1912–1994), was a Reformed theologian and influential sociologist throughout the second half of the 20th century as he engaged the intersection of sociology, theology, and technology. Both a theorist and activist, Ellul formulated and articulated his views against the backdrop of the global conflicts of the century. He highlighted the dangers of the technological turn in human history in which every field tended toward a system of absolute efficiency, often at the risk of humanity and divinity. Ellul’s work has continuing relevance for our increasingly technological age. As Christians face the emergence of advanced technologies, we should dialogue constructively with his work as a warning against the dangers of indiscriminate technological advancements.

Ellul was born in 1912 and educated in Bordeaux, France, earning several degrees including a doctorate in law.[[1]](#footnote-1) He initially accepted Marxism before converting to Christianity.[[2]](#footnote-2) Prior to serving as professor at the University of Bordeaux, Ellul was removed from the Strasbourg faculty because he opposed the pro-Nazi, Vichy French government.[[3]](#footnote-3) Over nearly four decades of teaching history and sociology at Bordeaux (1944–1980), Ellul left his mark on the fields of sociology, theology, and technology. He was particularly concerned with emerging technology and the increasing industrialization of every realm of life. In addition to his early interest in the economist Karl Marx, Ellul was strongly influenced by the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard and theologian Karl Barth.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Ellul’s historical context is important for understanding his unique perspective and contribution. He was an academic and author during World War II and the Cold War. For Ellul, theology and sociology were conducted in the face of increasingly powerful political and technological forces threatening the utter destruction of humanity.[[5]](#footnote-5) Ellul was a prolific writer, with influential publications from the 1960s to 1990s including *The Technological Society, The Politics of God and the Politics of Man, The Ethics of Freedom,*[[6]](#footnote-6) *The Presence of the Kingdom,* and *The Subversion of Christianity*.[[7]](#footnote-7) Okholm summarizes Ellul’s theological method:

In dialectical fashion, Ellul’s lifelong project combined rigorous sociological analysis of the modern world with a Christian response fashioned from biblical revelation. The two must be held together for confrontation and mutual criticism: the former keeps theology relevant and concrete; the latter keeps social science from becoming reductionistic…

Understanding Ellul requires observing this dialectical nature of reality, epistemology, and even biblical revelation. Even Ellul’s books must be read dialectically—one an answer to the other.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The result of Ellul’s dialectical methodology was a deeply pessimistic view of the role of emerging technology in relation to humanity and human relations with God. Lewin states that, “More than any other theologian, Ellul…has come to typify the pessimistic characteristic of the modern age.”[[9]](#footnote-9) His pessimism was expressed as he “challenged optimistic presuppositions about scientific progress and developing secularization.”[[10]](#footnote-10) This pessimism contrasted sharply with contemporary thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin, who saw technology as an emerging good.[[11]](#footnote-11) Chardin linked technological advancements to human progress and believed emerging technologies would be essential to the accomplishment of God’s eschatological purposes for humanity.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Conversely, Ellul saw technological advancement as a threat to human dignity and spiritual life. The revolutions of the 20th century were leading toward the development of what he called *la Technique*, “the totality of methods rationally arrived at and having absolute efficiency (for a given state of development) in every field of human activity.”[[13]](#footnote-13) Elsewhere, he defined it more briefly as “a self-perpetuating ‘cult of efficiency.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) Ellul believed technological advances were progressively dehumanizing people, reducing them to mere tools for efficiency. Human choices, while seemingly free and meaningful, become increasingly deterministic in a society which technologizes all human activity for measurable and efficient outcomes.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Ultimately, for Ellul, “any and all efforts to liberate the human condition from its postlapsarian labours are hopeless without the intervention of grace.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Consequently, and in light of the “powerlessness [of post-World War II politics] to bring anything but cosmetic changes,” he believed, “The church and theology must refuse to assimilate to societal forms and forces,” which promoted technological advancement.[[17]](#footnote-17) Instead, Ellul “championed personal freedom over and against complex modern authority structures which are in danger of controlling mankind collectively and depriving the individual of contact with God.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Ellul’s concerns have proven prescient in the three decades since his death. Artificial intelligence, transhumanism, and other emerging technologies raise harrowing questions regarding anthropology and theology. In a society obsessed with technological “advancement,” the Church may fruitfully dialogue with Ellul in light of Aquinas’ distinction between *scientia* (knowledge) and *sapientia* (wisdom).[[19]](#footnote-19) The two were memorably contrasted by Dr. Ian Malcolm in *Jurassic Park*, “Your scientists were so preoccupied with whether they *could*, they didn't stop to think if they *should*.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Ellul’s writings should be recovered as a source of reflection and warning as Christians face emerging technologies.

The contributions of Jacques Ellul were significant during his own time and remain relevant today. His interdisciplinary critique of the impact of technology on sociology and theology speaks to societies—past and present—bent on technological advancement which ignores or minimizes the negative impact on human and human-divine relationships. Christians may continue to dialogue with Ellul as we engage cultures devoted to efficiency, systems, and progress but which lack regard for God’s wisdom and human dignity.

1. D.L. Okholm, “Ellul, Jacques,” in Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Lewin, “Technology,” in Nicholas Adams, George Pattison, and Graham Ward, ed. *The Oxford Handbook of Theology & Modern European Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid., 464–465. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought*, ed. Alister E. McGrath (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), s.v. “Ellul, Jacques,” 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Okholm, 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Lewin, 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. McGrath, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lewin, 464–465. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Quoted in Okholm, 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Quoted in Lewin, 464. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid., 465. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Okholm, 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. McGrath, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. For an introduction, see Peter Leithart, “Sapientia and Scientia,” *Theopolis*, September 22, 2005, Online: <https://theopolisinstitute.com/leithart_post/sapientia-and-scientia/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Jurassic Park*, Steven Spielberg (Universal City, CA: Universal Studios, 1993), VHS. Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)