Preface

Nearly every facet of daily life has seen some kind of change over the last few decades. A proliferation of gadgets, devices, and ways of incorporating these objects into daily routines has drastically altered our ways of doing work, interacting with each other, and defining who we are. This book does not have anything to say about any of the new devices or technologies that have appeared over the last few decades, or at any time in the past. Rather, it is an examination of a slightly different set of opinions on the impact that these technological advances have had on our human condition. It is an attempt to give two particular individuals their chance to be heard, and in doing so, to allow readers to reflect on ways of thinking about technology that heretofore, they may not have considered. One should not read this book thinking that the opinions expressed by either Thomas Merton or Jacques Ellul are "correct" or "incorrect." I have attempted only to compare their views on technology and its impact on freedom, and in doing so have hopefully allowed those who may not be familiar with either of these thinkers to investigate some of their other writing more thoroughly.

What impact does technology have on freedom in the thought of Thomas Merton and Jacques Ellul? Contemporary technology has the potential to hinder humanity's attainment of freedom in their opinion. Both thinkers offer unique perspectives on the impact that they believe technology has had on society in the twentieth century, and they both offer unconventional definitions of the concept of freedom. It is important to note at the beginning that neither Merton nor Ellul sought to provide definitive answers to the questions they posed, but rather to encourage others to begin thinking more broadly about the consequences of continued advances in technology. This book will hopefully encourage others to do just that, and to use the ideas that Merton and Ellul proposed not as answers to any particular question, but as avenues for further inquiry into the nature and meaning of life in contemporary society.

Examining the perspectives offered by Merton and Ellul on technology and freedom allows those working within the disciplines of theology, literature, and the philosophy of technology to incorporate works by these two Christian thinkers within a variety of disciplines. Somewhat ironically, many readers may encounter this book online, or read it via e-book or on a Kindle—just a few of the marvels that contemporary technology has bestowed upon us. As one progresses through this book, it should become apparent that neither Merton nor Ellul are leveling a critique against particular technological products (with the exception perhaps of nuclear weapons), but rather against the processes that compose what they believe to be an all-encompassing technological system. Of particular interest in developing this book is the assertion in the July 1998 edition of *The Ellul Forum* that "for anyone who has read Ellul, the similarity of Merton's critique of technological civilization is startling and impressive. Virtually point for point, Merton and Ellul, writing about the same time, echo each other"[1] This study examines those mutual influences and addresses point-by-point a number of the similarities between Merton and Ellul regarding their critique of technology's role in contemporary society, and its impact on human freedom.

Situating Merton and Ellul within the ongoing philosophical debate over the role of technology in daily life and on the nature of freedom is another purpose behind this book. The chapters which follow identify similarities between their thinking and areas in which they found common intellectual ground. It is an attempt to fuse Merton's monastic response to the contemporary, technologically-focused world to Ellul's secular, albeit theologically-centered response. As one of the first comprehensive attempts to compare these two worldviews, this study represents a small but hopefully significant contribution to the field of Merton and Ellul scholarship.

In addition to their own ideas, the study identifies some of the common antecedents to their thought. Neither Merton nor Ellul developed their ideas concerning the impact of technology on the human condition in a vacuum. Having engaged with many of the intellectuals of their time, both thinkers either directly incorporated outside thinking into their own worldviews, or in some cases changed certain aspects of their thinking based on engagement with the ideas of others. Specifically, the study will address their intellectual engagement with Karl Barth, Søren Kierkegaard, Aldous Huxley, and Karl Marx.

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1. Fasching, "In This Issue," 1.

Both Thomas Merton and to a lesser extent, Jacques Ellul, have had their lives recounted and their ideas presented in a number of works since their deaths, and this study will not attempt to provide a complete review of either author's entire body of work, nor a complete biographical account of their lives. Similarities between their upbringings will be identified, establishing the pattern through which the study will attempt to compare their thought on a point-by-point basis, noting similarities and differences throughout. Examining Merton and Ellul through theological, sociological, and political lenses allows a point-by-point comparison of a number of different ideas that directly relate to the impact that they believed technology has had on the human condition. This comparison identifies commonalities of thought and traces some of the antecedents to their thought. Merton the Roman Catholic and Ellul the Protestant offer remarkably similar conclusions regarding the impact that technology has had on the human condition. As Christians, they provide a distinctly Christocentric view of freedom, and it is against this unique view that the impact of technology and the idea of progress is evaluated. While many readers will not agree with the definition of freedom that both men present, some may find that their analysis of technology's impact on our human condition still resonates in the twenty first century. In other words, one does not have to subscribe to a Christocentric view of freedom to necessarily find points of agreement with the specifics of the critique that is presented in these pages. In summary, both Merton and Ellul are examples of men not only thinking about the impact that technology has had on human freedom as much as they are individuals firmly committed to living out the ideals that they spent their lives articulating.