Ellul On Violence and Just War

by Andrew Goddard

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How should Christians respond to the violence of war ? What are those, who want to be faithful disciples of Christ, to say and to do? As Ellul states in the opening sentence of his book on the subject, "The churches and theologians…have never been in unanimous agreement in their views on violence in human society".[1] There has, nevertheless, been a predominant approach to the question of war, namely that of the "just war tradition". Ellul is a trenchant critic of this way of thinking and yet, as often in his writing, his comments are lacking in detailed engagement with the specific arguments of his opponents. Instead, he provides a broad-brush account and critique. While making some strong and valid objections, this is bound to leave anyone sympathetic to the just war tradition feeling rather dis-satisfied, perhaps even that they have been subjected to the "violence" of caricature.[2]

Given the importance of this subject and the strong differences of opinion found among Christians which results in divided witness to the world, it is necessary to step back and identify the fundamental differences between the just war tradition and Ellul's thinking and to ascertain whether any constructive dialogue can take place between them. This article highlights two areas in which the wider rationale and method of Ellul and the just war tradition stand in tension with each other, and it acknowledges both strengths and weaknesses that can be seen when the two approaches are placed in dialogue.

The heart of the divergence between Ellul's account of violence and that of the mainstream Christian tradition is perhaps most easily understood by reference to the two terms which identify that tradition – "just war". Ellul questions both the central moral category and frame of reference to be used in thinking about the subject and the central moral task of such moral thinking.

Subject Matter – War or Violence?

It is of the utmost importance that Ellul's account is focused on *violence,* and interestingly, in the original French is entitled *Contre les violents*.[3] The specific question of *war* is therefore set in the wider context of the phenomenon of *violence*. He does not concentrate on "hostile contention by means of armed forces, carried on between nations, states, or rulers, or between parties in the same nation or state; the employment of armed forces against a foreign power, or against an opposing party in the state."[4] Instead, he insists that thinking about this specific subject can only be properly done once there is, in the words of the title of his book's third chapter, "Christian realism in the face of violence".

This approach marks a significant shift in understanding the question. The great Christian theologians of the just war tradition generally approach their discussion from two angles. In some contexts, it is a question about how a confessing Christian with a particular political or military responsibility in society is to act or indeed whether they can faithfully remain in certain positions given the duties that will be incumbent upon them.[5] In others, it is seeking to elucidate the obligations of love and the prohibitions entailed by the specific commandment against murder.[6] In thinking about "war", in other words, we are being asked to reflect on a form of practical, political action that raises a fundamental moral question because it requires participants to be involved in the taking of human life.

Ellul, from the opening pages of his book, resets and critiques this tradition within his own predominant category of violence. So, categorizing this strand of Christian thinking as "compromise", he places the early Christian concerns about the state in relation to "violence". "They saw that the state…used violence against its enemies, internal or external. For war certainly seemed violence pure and simple, and the police operated by violence" (p. 2). The challenge that remained even when Christians held political office and the state ceased persecution of the church is expressed in the following terms – "the political power…continued to use violence" (p. 3). Ellul then explains how theologians and canonists responded to this challenge of what he insists on calling "internal violence" and "external violence" by the state.

In relation to "internal violence" Ellul discerns two key redefinitions taking place. A distinction is drawn between the state and human beings, and it is held that the state "never acts by violence when it constrains, condemns and kills" (p. 3). Instead, its actions are distinguished from "violence" by being conceived of as "force" so that the state "is the institution which demonstrates the difference between violence and force…There is all the difference between violence and force" (p. 4). The issue then becomes whether or not the state's use of force is "just" or "unjust" and conformity

to the law is here the determinative factor. However, even when the state does not conform to the law it still uses force – albeit now unjust force – rather than violence. This reasoning, Ellul claims, was an attempt "to clear the state of the charge of violence by explaining that it was not violence" (p. 5).

In relation to the external violence of war, Ellul contends that the church reasoned this way: "To deny the state the right to go to war was to condemn it to extinction;" yet the state was ordained by God, and therefore the state "must have the right to wage war" (p. 5). This he claims (though without citing any supporting evidence) was the origin and fundamental rationale for "the casuistry of the just war" whose evolving tradition he sums up in terms of seven conditions to make a war just. Although Ellul acknowledges that these "have theoretical solidity" (p. 6), he questions their practicality and relevance, especially in the contemporary world.

Ellul's own contrasting approach to the question is shaped by what he calls "Christian realism." "The Christian who wants to find out what he ought to do, must be realistic; this is the first step". The problem is that we need first to be clear what the Christian must be realistic about and herein lies the fundamental weakness of Ellul's work. "Violence" we have seen to be the lens through which he re-interprets and critiques the just war tradition. It is the phenomenon about which he insists we must be realistic. But "violence" is itself never defined by Ellul.[7] Clearly it is broader than the just war tradition's focus on the taking of human life, but just how broad it is remains unclear. The signs are, however, that for Ellul the term is exceedingly wide-ranging in its scope – "economic relations, class relations, are relations of violence, nothing else" (p. 86), "psychological violence…is simply violence, whether it takes the form of propaganda, biased reports, meetings of secret societies that inflate the egos of their members, brainwashing or intellectual terrorism" (p. 97). It would appear that Konyndyk is broadly correct that violent behaviour for Ellul is "coercing someone in a way that violates his personhood".[8] Given that "violence" is to be the over-arching interpretive category for Christian reflection on war, and is being used to explain Christian moral assessments in history which did not themselves primarily use this category, it would help if such a definition – or preferably a more precise one - had been given by Ellul himself.

Despite this weakness, there are two great strengths in Ellul's approach. Firstly, it refuses to mask the fact that punitive measures taken by political authority have the same basic structure as the wrong actions to which they respond. So fines (like stealing) take away people's property without their consent, imprisonment (like kidnapping) deprives persons of their liberty. Although this should be more obvious in war, the language of "force" means that it can be effectively forgotten. As Glover comments, "It is widely held that killing in war is quite different. It is not, and we need to think about the implications of this".[9] But this similarity need not mean moral differentiation is impossible: materially the act of sexual intercourse has a common structure whether it is joyful marital sex, adultery, fornication or rape; the insertion of a knife into human flesh could be an act of surgery or grievous bodily harm. Ellul formulates a stark law of the identity or sameness of all violence. When it is given a moral focus in order to insist that we cannot distinguish between just and unjust violence or violence that liberates and violence that enslaves, this simply asserts what really needs to be argued for.

Secondly, Ellul also highlights the continuity between the internal coercive actions of political authority ("police functions" as we might call them) and the external actions (military functions in war). Here there is continuity with the traditional just war understanding. That tradition similarly refuses to treat these as two independent spheres with different moralities or criteria for action. Ellul thus will be sympathetic to a common critique made by just war theorists. They point out that there is a tension (if not incoherence) in being a principled advocate of non-violent pacifism but not being a non-violent anarchist (Ellul's own position) or being committed to just war thinking but absolutely opposed in all circumstances to capital punishment. Where Ellul differs fundamentally is that the just war tradition is marked by seeing the task of political authority as one which can legitimately be fulfilled – at home and abroad, through police and through military – through the subordination of all uses of "violence" to the pursuit of justice.

Ellul himself held such views in his first published book where, in discussing biblical texts such as Romans 13 on the "use of the sword", he writes,

> The use of the sword in itself is not condemned…The use is subject to eventual condemnation…which will become a reality only if the sword…serves either the obstruction of justice or the spirit of power. Within this eschatological perspective, man's judgment in the realm of law assumes its rightful value. His judgment is the reason why the use of the sword will not be condemned. Any use of it apart from man's judgment runs counter to God's will….It is law which, before God, permits the use of force.[10]

Although it is difficult to be clear as to why Ellul departed from this viewpoint, one factor is perhaps found in his comment that the just war tradition is "based on the conviction that man can retain control of violence, that violence can be kept in the service of order and justice and even of peace" (pp. 5-6). Ellul's realism about violence appears to have led him to reject this fundamental presupposition which is essential to just war thinking. In contrast to the just war tradition and his own early views, not only does he place all reflection about war under the broader rubric and laws of violence, he sees violence (and so war as a subset within that) as a force which rules human beings. Occasionally in this writing he relates this to his theological understanding of

the principalities and powers by naming violence as "one of the 'rudiments' (*stoicheia*) of this world".[11] This is, once again, a feature of Ellul's work which frustratingly he does not develop but it stands as a further reminder that the just war tradition, in making judgments about war, must avoid an unrealistic picture of sovereign individuals abstracted from the reality of power making choices about their actions. In making moral judgments about particular actions it is also vitally important to consider in all our thinking the work of the powers in the wider shaping of our society and politics.

The Purpose – Justification or Confession?

Ellul's differences with the just war tradition are not limited to his insistence on approaching the subject of war through the much larger category of violence then understood by him in a much more globalistic and quasi-deterministic fashion. He has a fundamental objection to just war's attempt to provide justification for certain violent actions. This objection would appear to take two forms.

First, in his realistic analysis of violence, one of the features Ellul identifies – his fifth and final law of violence - is that "the man who uses violence always tries to justify both it and himself" (p. 103). The horror and agony caused by violence means, he claims, that everyone who uses it seeks to demonstrate that they have acted morally when they have turned to violence. More controversial still – especially given that the Augustinian strand of the just war tradition appeals to "love of neighbor" as its rationale for the use of coercive force – Ellul explains that this universality of justification derives from the fact that "violence is an expression of hatred, has its source in hatred and signifies hatred….It is absolutely essential for us to realize that there is an unbreakable link between violence and hatred" (p. 104). The just war tradition is, therefore, in Ellul's eyes simply one of the multiple forms of self-justification inevitably developed by fallen human beings in the face of their own violence.

Second, although Ellul can apparently accept that Christians will use violence, he refuses to accept their justifications for this. Instead, he emphasizes that "as Christians we must firmly refuse to accept whatever justifications are advanced" (p. 140). He is insistent that "in their radical refusal to justify violence, Christians must not leave the smallest breach" (p. 141). Although particularly clear in his discussion of violence, this reflects a wider feature of Ellul's approach to the task of Christian ethics. He is constantly on the alert to prevent a Christian ethic from becoming a means of human self-justification that escapes God's gracious gift of justification by faith in Christ.[12] Violence, Ellul argues, is a sign of the fact that we have sinned and ruptured our communion with God. We must not, therefore, formulate means to justify it in certain circumstances. Instead, we must confess our sin and seek God's forgiveness. For Ellul, the important truth is that the Christian cannot have a good conscience. "The Christian, even when he permits himself to use violence in what he considers the best of causes, cannot either feel or say that he is justified; he can only confess that he is a sinner, submit to God's judgment, and hope for God's grace and forgiveness" (p. 138). It is, however, important to realize that Ellul as emphatically rejects pacifist-inspired forms of self-justification which are developed for a policy of non-violence. He is quite honest that, "in the face of the tragic problem of violence, the first truth to be discerned is that, whatever side he takes, the Christian can never have an easy conscience and never feel that he is pursuing the way of truth" (p. 138). Yoder is therefore right to describe Ellul as holding the view that "the Christian will have to use violence but will know that it is sinful",[13] but Ronald Ray is also correct in drawing attention to the fact that "even the Christian position of non-violence involves guilt".[14]

This approach to the question of a Christian attitude to war provides a necessary challenge to some of the uses Christians make of the just war tradition. That tradition too easily becomes a means by which "our side" in a military conflict is able to claim moral superiority over the enemy and believe itself not guilty. Too many politicians and Christian leaders uncritically apply the "criteria" for a just war in a simplistic manner. They can simply become a checklist of tests in order to show that the decision to go to war is justified and that right is on the side of their government. Ellul, in contrast, highlights the painful and tragic reality of living in a fallen world and being, in Luther's famous phrase, *simul justus et peccator*.

There is, however, a major weakness in Ellul's approach. This is found in the fact that in its aversion to any form of self-justification it is of little or no practical help to people faced with the harsh realities of living and acting in the real world. Two pieces of evidence show the dangers in Ellul's approach. Firstly, he appears incoherent and inconsistent when he attempts to make moral distinctions between different violent acts. He will state that as a Christian he "cannot call violence good, legitimate and just" (p. 133) and yet there are situations when he says he approves of certain violent acts (p. 69). Indeed, in the original French, he even writes of conditions in which the use of violence is acceptable and not condemnable.[15] Yet later he can write that violence is always condemnable.[16] [17]

Secondly, when it comes to the full and extreme horrors of war, we see the further difficulty in treating all violence as the same and refusing to offer any means of moral discrimination. Here, Ellul appears to accept that "anything goes" once war has begun and to refuse any moral constraint lest those who accept the proposed limits then believe they are justified in the limited violence that they do use. So, in conversation with Patrick Troude-Chastenet he reflected on the French experience in Algeria in these terms:

> According to me, once you have decided to go to war you have to go all out and use every means at your disposal. This is the case that applied in Algeria. Everyone was shouting their heads off

> against the torture that was going on. But the real problem was not the torture but the war itself. There is no morality in war. If you want to win you must pull out all the stops.[17]

Ellul is thus in a paradoxical situation compared to the just war tradition. That tradition seeks to limit war by acknowledging certain carefully delineated situations in which the use of coercion is justified. In so doing, it also lays down clear boundaries and a duty in certain contexts to sue for peace rather than to use immoral means. Ellul, in contrast, stands resolutely opposed to violence. However, his refusal to distinguish between different forms and levels of violence, his rejection of anything that could be construed as justification for violence, and his emphasis instead on the need to confess our necessary sinfulness in the fallen world, means that Christians guided by his approach may find themselves ending up involved in torture as a sad necessity (or presumably dropping nuclear weapons) in military conflict.

In short, Ellul has an aversion to any approach to moral thinking that he believes risks facilitating self-justification or denying the continuing presence of sin in all our actions. Pushed to an extreme, however, this makes his writing incapable of providing moral guidance or setting clear and realistic moral limits. As Oliver O'Donovan comments in his discussion of whether killing is a moral evil that we are bound at all costs to avoid and thus participation in war totally prohibited,

> The curious hybrid notions of "sin within the realm of necessity"(J.Ellul) and "responsible assumption of guilt" (H. Thielicke) capture dramatically the subjective moral tension which belongs to a decision of such gravity, but they leave the deliberative question in paradox and so seem to have more rhetorical than conceptual persuasiveness.[18]

Perhaps nothing illustrates the difficulty more sharply than Ellul's startling claim that "apart from the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the use of violence is always an *a priori* contrary to the will of God".[19] How one discerns the Spirit's inspiration to use violence is, sadly, unelaborated. Presumably to attempt to do so would be to deny divine freedom and risk providing a means of self-justification!

Conclusion

Ellul and the just war tradition clearly approach the subject of moral judgment in war from quite different perspectives. It is important to recognize that these different approaches to the subject then shape their different conclusions.

In the light of the valid criticisms and cautions raised by Ellul but also the serious weaknesses in his own method, the challenge is whether or not a third way is possible. This could represent a chastened form of just war thinking in the light of Ellul's critique. In contrast to Ellul's work (where his attempt to reconfigure the Christian tradition by making "violence" the controlling concept risks distorting the structure of the tradition's account of morality in war) this would recognize and build upon the strengths of the just war tradition. Rather than just subsuming war under a strong account of "violence" and eschewing anything that could amount to self-justification, this would provide a careful structured analysis of the key questions which must be addressed in thinking about going to war and conducting war: who is to wage war? why should they have recourse to war? when should they do so? how should they fight? It would draw on the wisdom of the just war tradition to discern where significant moral boundaries lie in each of these areas.

In particular, like Ellul in his earlier writing, it would be based on the conviction that the structure and limits which must be placed on any use of destructive or lethal force are defined by the fact that just judgment is not only necessary but good and the divinely ordained task of government in a fallen world. It is therefore certainly true that "violence" is a sign of the fallenness of the world – Ellul's emphasis on this must not be ignored even if it needs to be tempered – but it does not follow that all recourse to violence is the same and so moral discrimination impossible.[20] There is, for example, a difference between war in order to right wrongs (just cause) and war for self-aggrandisement even if the latter is sometimes masked behind a claim that it is the former. There is a difference as well as a similarity between attacking opposing armed forces and engaging in torture of prisoners of war or blanket bombing of non-combatants.

This approach would, however, need to remedy the weaknesses in the just war tradition that become evident in the light of Ellul's approach. In particular it must redress the tendency to be unrealistic about the nature of human violence. There has to be a challenge to the idealism about human control in the face of the power of violence that so often undermines just war thinking. Perhaps most important of all, Ellul's critique has highlighted the tendency of the just war pattern of thinking to be hijacked for self-justification which masks the pervasiveness of human sin. The tradition could, however, be used as a more critical and prophetic tool. It would then raise before those holding political power and claiming to act justly, the challenging questions of their own complicity in global injustice and their enthrallment to the powers of Technique and propaganda as they make decisions about war in the contemporary world.

As in so many spheres of his thought, Ellul's work on violence runs the risk of an "all or nothing" response. Those attracted to the just war tradition easily ignore him as of no relevance to the realities of international power politics. Those eager for a prophetic Christian voice easily buy uncritically into his sweeping analysis of violence and by dismissing the tradition as "casuistry" and "compromise" find they are unable to offer guidance to those – including many Christians - with the terrible

responsibilities of political authority. By recognizing the deeper divergences in method and focus between Ellul and the just war tradition and outlining both his strengths and weaknesses, it is possible to go beyond Ellul's work and develop a realistic analysis of the nature of war today that draws on the majority Christian tradition Ellul himself once embraced in order to encourage a prophetic yet discriminating voice for those seeking to be faithful disciples of Christ.[21]

References

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[1] Jacques Ellul, *Violence: Reflections from a Christian Perspective* (London : SCM Press, 1970), p. 1. All page references in the text refer to this volume.

[2] The main critiques and account of the historical origins of the tradition are found in his categorisation of this approach as one of "compromise" (*Violence*, pp. 1-9) and his appendix on conscientious objection (*Anarchy and Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 91-5). A less polemical account of the origins of the Christian just war tradition is found in his study of the history of institutions (*Histoire des Institutions Vol 2*, (Paris: PUF, 1989, pp. 506-7, 525-7). Particularly given our current context, it is also important to note that he sees this tradition in part shaped by Islam's subversion of Christian faith (*Subversion of Christianity*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), pp.100-4.

[3] Jacques Ellul, *Contre les violents* (Le Centurion, 1972).

[4] Oxford English Dictionary's primary definition of 'war'.

[5] So, in the tradition, among the key classic texts are Augustine's letter to Count Boniface (Letter 189, from 418AD) with the counsel, "Do not think that it is impossible for any one to please God while engaged in active military service" and Luther's "Whether Soldiers, too, Can be Saved" (1526) written to respond to the concerns of Assa von Kram of Wittenberg about reconciling his Christian faith and military profession.

[6] Thus Aquinas' main discussions in the *Summa* are (a) *ST* II-II, q40 which is entitled "of war" and, importantly, under the discussion of charity and (b) *ST II-II,* q64 "Of Murder".

[7] This is a common criticism of Ellul's writing; for example, "The first question, then would seem to be: What is violence? But, strangely, Ellul does not address it" (Kenneth J. Konyndyk, "Violence" in Clifford G. Christians & Jay M. Van Hook (eds), *Jacques Ellul: Interpretive Essays* (University of Illinois Press, 1981), p. 256.

[8] Konyndyk, *op.cit.*, p. 256.

[9] Jonathan Glover, *Causing Death and Saving Lives* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), p. 251.

[10] Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 113.

[11] Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (New York: Seabury, 1970), p.174.

[12] The fullest account of this is his *To Will and To Do: An Ethical Research for Christians* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1969) where (p.108), Ellul asserts, "Every honest reflection must absolutely begin by acknowledging that…there cannot be a Christian ethic". I have discussed this point more fully in my *Living the Word, Resisting the World* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2002), pp. 108-112.

[13] John Howard Yoder, *Nevertheless* (Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1992), p. 177. n16.

[14] Ronald Ray, *A Critical Examination of Jacques Ellul's Christian Ethic* (unpublished Ph.D., University of St. Andrews, 1973), p. 196, n3.

[15] "acceptable, non condemnable" *(Contre les violents),* p. 170.

[16] "La violence est *toujours* condamnable" (*Les combats de la liberte* (Geneva : Labor et Fides, 1984), p. 166 (italics orignal).

[17] *Jacques Ellul on Religion, Technology and Politics : Conversations with Patrick Troude-Chastenet* (Atlanta : Scholars Press, 1998), p. 39.

[18] Oliver O'Donovan, "War and Peace" in McGrath, Alister (ed), *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1993), pp. 655-6.

[19] *The Ethics of Freedom* (London: Mowbrays, 1976), p. 406.

[20] "The distinction between a moral and a non-moral evil can be rendered in terms of what is evil *as action* and what is evil *as suffering.* Not every action that involves the suffering of evil is an evil action. The non-pacifist tradition has represented the justified belligerent as suffering the evil of necessity, but not as doing evil" (O'Donovan, *op. cit.,*p. 655).

[21] I have explored some of these issues a little further in the booklet *When Is War Justified?* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2003), available from www.grovebooks.co.uk

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