Comment on Coleman

Ki Do Ahn

As an Asian theologian, trained and educated in the United States, I've been exposed to the rapid development of computer technology and the Internet throughout my life. It is from the perspective of someone born within this era that I was asked to write a response to Jacques Ellul's *The Technological Society*.[1] This book first came to my attention eight years ago while I was an undergraduate, majoring in theology and volunteering with the college's computer club; maintaining computers in the School of Theology.

Reading this book again, I was fascinated to see that Ellul foresaw some of the present advances in technology. In this book, he seems to imply that when the total integration of technology happens, it will lead society to a point of completion. "With the final integration of the instinctive and the spiritual by means of these human techniques, the edifice of the technical society will be completed." (p. 426) Ellul seems to envision ideal humans in an ideal society in which people always agree with one another.

My first response to Ellul is related to the philosophy of modernism and/or post-modernism—the idea that through technology it is possible to become an ideal person, even though post-modernism insists that an ideal person or thing doesn't exist. Modernism assumes that the edifice of a technical society will be complete at some point in the future. However, I believe

_____
Ki Do Ahn, PhD, is a student in interdisciplinary studies at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley and CPE supervisory candidate at Stanford University Medical Center, 300 Pasteur Dr., Stanford CA, 94305 (Email: kahn@ses.gtu.edu).

the edifice of society might not be complete until the end of the world and therefore forming the structure of a technical society will be more process than completion.

The recent interest in spirituality can illustrate this tension. People seek "techniques" that can lead them to more spiritual living, but the focus on technique will not create a common spirituality—the possible spiritualities that people might embrace are potentially endless. In particular, digital technology increases access to spiritual information, burdening people to choose from among too many options. The easy availability of information on the Internet can lead us into undo complexity and seems to contrast with the efficient techniques advocated by Ellul. I believe that people receive more value from the process of online research and the rich resources it makes available than they would from a simpler, more "efficient" process.

Also, Ellul assumes that people bond through techniques and he foresaw the digital networks that have developed into the current "cyber world," where information flows freely across most of the Earth. One can fashion several different personalities of oneself and engage in many different types of social interactions within totally different worlds. In this sense, technology makes it possible and, perhaps, even necessary to be bi-lingual living in multiple worlds. One can choose to live in one cyber world or in two, or more, worlds at the same time. Technology offers multiple options—the simplest example is teleconferencing tools, such as Skype, where people can have live, real-time interactions with friends and relatives in other countries.

The transformation of technology is ongoing and, as it grows, will continue to effect human transformation. It may be too early to determine whether the completion of the edifice of a technological society is possible or not. Today, fifty years after Jacques Ellul published *The Technological Society*, many of the themes he envisioned are now a part of daily living. I value this book and feel it may be helpful to revisit it again sometime in the future.

NOTE

1.   Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Society*, John Wilkinson, trans. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), originally published in 1954 as *La Technique ou L'enjeu du Siècle*.