



## Babylon Will Be Found No More

### On Affinities between Christianity and Anarcho-Primitivism

Johan Eddebo, Uppsala University, Sweden

#### Abstract

This paper addresses affinities between Christian political theology and the Anarcho-primitivist critique of civilization. It is argued that there is a significant constructive potential in such a critique, especially in relation to the current political and societal situation, and that the critique to a great extent is compatible with traditional Christianity. It is further argued that this constructive potential, while currently hampered, can be effectively unlocked in relation to a proper theological anchoring of Anarcho-primitivism. It is then maintained that such an anchoring could most plausibly be provided by the Abrahamic traditions, and especially the Christian, due to the particular compatibility between Anarcho-primitivism and Christianity.

Keywords: Anarchism, Christian political theology, technology, civilization, peak oil

#### Introduction

There is a growing tendency to question civilization among today's political avant-garde on both sides of the spectrum. The libertarian left is not only attacking globalization and the neo-liberal political economy, but is increasingly embracing the project of transitioning to a localized, sustainable, and low-tech form of society. Traditionalist conservatives, at the other end of the spectrum, are likewise expressing doubts regarding the legitimacy of a centralized state intimately intertwined with technologies that impinge upon human dignity and liberty, anchoring their critique in theological foundations (see e.g. Kalb).

Given this situation, it is pertinent to review the merits of this critique of civilization as such, but also the possible affinities between its drastically diverse proponents. In attempting to do so, we will examine the more radical formulations of the general critique of civilization

advanced by the left-aligned Anarcho-primitivism, and its compatibility with certain forms of Judaeo-Christian political theology, which generally factors into the theological foundations of, among others, the religious right. Our discussion of this compatibility will also, to varying degrees, be relevant to Abrahamic political theology in general.

The disposition of the paper is as follows: First, the Anarcho-primitivist critique of civilization will be presented. Then a bridge from Christian political theology to Anarcho-primitivism will be constructed, with special regard to the work of Jacques Ellul. This is then opposed to more positive views on civilization and the state represented in traditional Christian political theology. Finally, the value and utility of the Anarcho-primitivist critique will be defended, as represented mainly by John Zerzan, Bob Black, and Joseph Tainter, and arguments for the necessity of its theological anchoring in terms of bringing the critique to fruition are given.

### **Civilization and Its Discontents**

To begin with, however, one might remark that attacking civilization as such in a generalized manner seems quite counterintuitive – notwithstanding Freud's well-known proposition that the domesticity of civilization and the constraints it necessarily places upon human nature are the causes of much discomfort, even suffering. The modern Western denizen encountering the primitivist critique may yet very well ask whether it is at all reasonable to strongly criticize or reject civilization as such, and what this kind of rejection entails. What civilization is, why one would want to criticize or reject it, and what this opposition really would mean, practically and theoretically, are all questions to which the proponent of Anarcho-primitivism first of all must respond.

For one thing, it is perhaps not entirely obvious what flaws the primitivists are looking to criticize. Has not civilization, in terms of centralization, the building of cities, the development of agriculture and economic and technological progress, even counting its significant drawbacks, overwhelmingly been a great blessing for most humans on this earth? Has it not actually been the true horn of plenty which was dreamed of in the ancient myths? The behemoth, or perhaps Leviathan, finally tamed and made to pull the peasant's plow for the good of everyone?

As always, however, not everyone is inclined to agree, and an increasing number of voices contend that the drawbacks of civilization actually outweigh the positive benefits, and accordingly reject modernity's general position that civilization simply is an obvious good.

Civilization is by the primitivist critics minimally defined in terms of the development of agriculture, of the growth of cities (i.e., urbanization) and the institutionalization of expansionist, growth-based economics which imply technological development, and the centralization of power and the emergence of organized violence, both external and internal.<sup>1</sup> It is argued to neither be a necessary, nor a desirable state of human societies (Heinberg). Civilization considered in this sense is a new development with regard to the history of our species, and is not present within many forms of contemporary societies, such as modern

<sup>1</sup> A maximal definition of civilization according to the more radical primitivists includes all forms of domestication, including, e.g., horticulture and even tool-making.

hunter-gatherers, so it can hardly be considered a necessary or inevitable condition of human society. The primitivists further contend that even if a rejection of this particular form of society seems highly impractical, even in some sense quixotic, it is possibly ethically binding, as well as pragmatically advisable to do so in the long run, not least due to the detrimental ecological effects of civilization.

A basic support for this latter contention is found in the fact that the global environment is today facing a set of interrelated, disastrous processes, which are causally related to the set of institutions that make up civilization as defined above, especially with regard to industrial agriculture, urbanization, economic growth, and technological expansion. These destructive processes amount to ecological and societal challenges on a scale hitherto unknown, almost unimagined, and their list can be made quite long. There are, for instance, climate change, or anthropogenic global warming; increasing top soil erosion; mineral depletion; widespread pollution of various sorts; receding water tables and desertification; and on top of everything we are dealing with the ongoing Holocene mass extinction event with a loss of up to 140,000 species per year and the related degradation of bio-diverse habitats such as rainforests and coral reefs (Ceballos et al.).

Even if the health of ecosystems is disregarded, the situation is equally dire for industrial civilization as such. We have entered an advanced stage of resource depletion, peak oil with regard to conventional forms of extraction is by most accounts already a past event, even according to the highly regarded International Energy Agency, and our global economy, based upon exponential growth, has according to many observers been buckling under the resulting pressures for a number of years (OECD/EIA: 48). The maintenance of industrial civilization demands ready access to many, if not most, of the resources already in depletion, especially petroleum (Friedemann: 23-28). Failing to provide these, particularly the energy resources, will necessarily mean the end of growth-based civilization and a decline in complexity, technology, urbanization, and political centralization of human societies (Tainter: 209ff). Therefore, it may reasonably be argued that society ought to strive for degrowth and undevelopment before the inevitable fact of resource depletion triggers various forms of chaotic societal adaptations, to instead provide a soft roll-back of complex civilization. This is essentially the (moderate) primitivist position: civilization cannot possibly be maintained indefinitely, so it should be dismantled sooner rather than later.

### **The Primitivist Critique and the Definition of Civilization**

Who are the Anarcho-primitivists and what, more exactly, do they contend? During the latter part of the twentieth century, an outgrowth of the environmental movement and the Western anarchist traditions began to regard these issues just mentioned not as redeemable aspects of contemporary society that could be addressed with even the most thoroughgoing reforms, but as more or less inevitable features of civilization itself. The proponents of this radical critique have been variously known as primitivists, Green Anarchists, or Anarcho-primitivists. Their ideological heritage has a wide variety of roots, but it is often traced back to Rousseau, the British Luddite movement, the work of David Henry Thoreau, and to some extent that of other American idealists such as Emerson. It also has links to the Tolstoyan movement of the twentieth century, as well as the Frankfurt School. Like all Western anarchism, it can be connected to the European Anabaptist movement of the early modern

era as well as to the monastic tradition in general, but the contemporary primitivist movement is for the most part religiously unaffiliated.

The primitivist critique of civilization is relatively straightforward. It proceeds from a stipulated definition and analysis of civilization as a set of social institutions, which then is argued to entail the emergence or aggravation of the problematic developments associated with sedentary, growth-based human cultures, which then comes to a climax in the modern industrial era in which these issues are historically most exacerbated and potentially most destructive, in particular due to the effects of technology, which is regarded as a force multiplier of the institutions of civilization and the state.

The prominent contemporary representatives of the movement all define civilization in roughly the same manner. Civilization is basically thought of as a form of society or societal pattern that is inherently unsustainable, that depletes available natural resources in its proximity, which today is the entire global environment, and is characterized by invasive and rapid, often exponential, growth; by the implied acquisition of, and competition for neighboring land and resources; central control; organized violence and warfare; by the emergence of hierarchical structures and general internal repression of the populace; and, finally, by the associated cultural, mental, and material artefacts of all the preceding factors, including everything from capitalism and consumer society, to nationalism, nuclear power, and an assortment of physical and mental illnesses (Zerzan). These basic characteristics can arguably be further abstracted into three more general ones: exponential growth (Garrett), hierarchical centralization (Gelderloos) and, importantly, the projection of internal and external violence.

Morally speaking, the presence of civilization is according to the primitivist position a cause of unnecessary suffering, both of humans and non-humans – i.e., one generally sees these problems portrayed within the framework of some form of consequentialist ethics, but other ethical theories are clearly compatible as well.

In contrast to the primitivist analysis, common textbook definitions of “civilization” often simply ascribe positive value. The concept as such is very ideologically entrenched, and has historically functioned as an excluding identifier of particularly Western modernity. Accordingly, civilization is still often identified as any form of society that has attained an advanced level of culture, of government, of technology or the like (e.g., Oxford English Dictionary). Whenever it is defined more critically, appeals are generally made to a variety of the following concepts and institutions: the rule of law, the institutionalization of private property, state monopoly on violence, the spread of disciplinary institutions, the advancement of science and technology, urbanization, to growth-based industry, consumer economics, and electoral democracy, and sometimes also to secularization. Definitions of civilization on these grounds are, however, without much difficulty compatible with the primitivist critique, since most of these aspects clearly stand in a positive relationship to the three general characteristics mentioned above, that is, exponential growth, hierarchical centralization and the projection of violence.

### Anarchism, Technology, and Anarcho-Primitivism

Basically, the primitivist perspective is that Anarcho-primitivism represents the logical endpoint of the more general anarchist rejection of hierarchy, domination and arbitrary authority. In other words, since civilization is regarded as, fundamentally, an unsustainable system of violent oppression, the logical conclusion of the anarchist position is by the primitivists argued to be a rejection of civilization as such. Civilizational institutional systems are thought of as an extension of the oppressive and destructive hierarchies that the Anarchist already rejects (Zerzan: 42-52).

By implication, opposing or rejecting civilization then entails the rejection of a good deal of modern technology, due to it either 1) being entirely dependent upon the institutions which make up civilization as defined above, or 2) in that much if not most technology stands in a positive relationship to the spread and entrenchment of the problematic facets of civilization (Black: 131-38).

The first problematic aspect of modern technology is generally related to the implicit prerequisites and effects of particular technologies. Technology is argued to be non-neutral in terms of politics, value, power, as well as prerequisites and entailments in terms of other forms of technology. Certain technologies depend upon problematic social arrangements, and they in turn reproduce and further these. In the words of activist and technology critic Jerry Mander, an institution such as nuclear energy

. . . cannot possibly move society in a democratic direction, but *will* move society in an autocratic direction. Because it is so expensive and so dangerous, nuclear energy must be under the direct control of centralized financial, governmental, and military institutions. A nuclear power plant is not something that a few neighbors can get together and build. Community control is anathema (35).

Similarly, proponents of primitivism argue that technologies developed and retained within the framework of civilization's social structure presuppose a certain technological and institutional substructure for support, and bring with them implicit consequences in terms of, e.g., politics, power, and environmental effects, as well as other sub-technologies with their own potentially detrimental effects. Nuclear energy, for instance, necessarily carries with it a system for production, refinement, and distribution of the fuels, not to speak of waste management, which in turn is only viable given a functional industrial infrastructure supported by readily available fossil fuels. Nuclear energy is only conceivable within a framework of expansive, growth-based industrial economy, whereas a steady-state, no-growth economy could scarcely commit to the substantial material and financial investments necessary for establishing economically viable nuclear power production, which even in a growth economy can take decades to reach the point of financial break-even (Deutch et al.).

The second problematic aspect regards technology's role as a force multiplier of civilization and the state. Simply put, technology developed and retained within civilization's framework will over time tend towards expanding the control and influence of civilization's societal institutions, especially with regard to the competitive nature of the social environment characterized by economic growth, centralization, hierarchy, and projection of violence.

Therefore, the primitivists argue, the implicit effects of civilization's technologies will tend towards expanding and reproducing its characteristic institutions, and anarchists ought therefore to reject much of said technology since they already repudiate centralizing and generally growth-based economics, hierarchy, and state violence (Zerzan: 67-80).

The positive visions of Anarcho-primitivism differ somewhat in character with regard to the perspective on how much technology and mediation is acceptable. Moderate primitivism arguably strives for a return to, or a roll-back to, a decentralized, sustainable society with low levels of technology that can be maintained locally and do not risk triggering institutional growth-processes, generally within the framework of a permacultural system of production. More radical forms of primitivism such as Zerzan's considers even agriculture and horticulture inherently problematic technologies that carry with them the seeds of violence, domestication, objectification, and runaway economic growth, and portrays a positive vision of a future human society akin to those of contemporary hunter-gatherers. The parallels to the Christian dogma of the Fall are glaring, with domestication and objectification functioning as primordial sins ushering in the deadly process of civilization. Zerzan has suggested that this should be considered the proper reading of similar religious narratives that are found in many cultures throughout the world.

### **The Primitivist Critique and Christian Political Theology**

We will now move on to the thought of Jacques Ellul, representing an anarchist-friendly theology, as a starting-point for exploring the affinities between the primitivist critique of civilization and Christian political theology. Throughout his life and work, Ellul advocated for a Christian rejection of worldly politics and generally criticized the advancement of modern technological society, which he argued was inextricably interwoven with the concentration of power, institutionalized oppression, and the environmental ravages of modern capitalism. His arguments pertaining to Christianity's affinity with anarchism are generally based in ethics and exegesis. We will explore the most important aspects of his general case for Christian anarchism, which due to his position on technology must also be considered a form of moderate primitivism, notwithstanding the primitivists' arguments that their position is implied by general anarchism.

The perspective of most mainstream Christian political theology, sees civilization, at the very least, as something potentially good. Like everything else in creation, and especially our human endeavors, it is decidedly flawed and apt to entail a great deal of negative consequences, yet is generally considered a positive and redeemable product of our God-given reason and creative abilities, that brings much good with it. In the words of C. S. Lewis, the state, and the civilization associated with it, are more or less neutral, albeit useful tools:

The State exists simply to promote and to protect the ordinary happiness of human beings in this life. A husband and wife chatting over a fire, a couple of friends having a game of darts in a pub, a man reading a book in his own room or digging in his own garden – that is what the State is there for. And unless they are helping to increase and prolong and protect such moments, all the laws, parliaments, armies, courts, police, economics, etc., are simply a waste of time (1944: 199).

In this basic positive sentiment towards the state, Lewis is hardly alone among the Christian theologians of history. Thomas Aquinas in *De Regimine Principum* evidently considered worldly government and its institutions to be in some sense a representative of divine authority and the ruler's vicarious authority a necessary feature of any functioning human society (see Aquinas). On a similar note, Augustine in *The City of God* can arguably be interpreted as approaching history in terms of an epic struggle between two forms of civilization, the fallen kind versus the one divinely aligned.

This basic position of civilization and worldly government as something fundamentally good, if corrupt, has often been supported with reference to certain texts in the New Testament, particularly Paul's ostensible sanctioning of worldly authority as a servant of God in the letter to the Romans, wherein the recipients are admonished to submit to the "governing authorities," and the role of the state as a servant of God for the sake of good is explicitly proclaimed (13:1-7).

Nevertheless, none of these theologians were blind to the ambiguities of the position. Paul, as did the Christians of the early Church, knew full well that the worldly powers were not always righteous or just. In the middle of the first century, no state-like entity in the Mediterranean world was favorably aligned with the early Church, and persecution at the hands of the political authorities was both expected and clearly attested (e.g., Acts 14:22; 16:16-24; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 3:12). Indeed, as Karl Barth argued in his exegesis of Romans 13, the general sentiment towards rebelling that is implied in this text would be completely inexplicable unless there actually was some reason for the early Church to condemn the worldly powers as such. Likewise, both Aquinas and Augustine express a clear understanding of the dual nature of the state. Augustine, for one, never identifies the "City of God" with any form of worldly order that human civilization may actually realize, but rather as the divine order to which human societies at any cost must attempt to approach and finally submit, even if, as he explicitly states, it finally threatens the survival of civilization as such (Book I). Aquinas, while more obviously apologetic towards the worldly powers, is yet clearly aware of the issue of tyranny and the problems of unjust government, and sees in the powers always the risk of such pathologies arising (*De Regimine Principum* III-IV). It is precisely this ambiguity that Ellul emphasizes in his political theology.

### Ellul's Critique

Ellul maintains that the Biblical account characterizes civilization, the state and worldly government, as having a dual nature, and that this fact precludes what he terms a monistic either-or-analysis. This means that we can never rightly determine a state to be good or just in any given circumstance, notwithstanding all its ostensibly good works or positive contributions, since by its nature, it is necessarily the source of persecution and injustice (1969: 2-3). At the same time, however, this duality entails that the state is in some sense ordained by God, since, as is attested by the relevant texts, there is finally no authority that does not come from God. However, the position that the state is thus ordained, is in Ellul's view not a sanctioning of the state's inherent goodness as such, but a recognition of the fact that it exists, for instance, for the sake of trial, chastisement, and punishment of sins.

To Ellul, civilization is thus a metaphysical evil in the same sense as a destructive forest fire or an earthquake, and a moral evil to the extent that it is willfully supported, spread, and

sanctioned by people. Ellul supports his position by arguing that it is vindicated by the general trend of the Biblical accounts, throughout both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and that the very few opposing texts should be read with this overarching context in mind. It should also be noted that Ellul's critique of civilization is more amicable to a deontological ethical framework than is the general non-theistic Anarcho-primitivist position.

Ellul, perhaps commonly considered an anarchist *simpliciter*, should rather be interpreted as a moderate primitivist due to the simple fact that he considers most forms of technology to be an extension of the power of state and capital, including those necessary for the institutions of civilization as previously discussed.

Ellul builds his case within the Christian context mainly with reference to the New Testament and the sayings of Jesus, but also anchors it in an exegesis of relevant parts of the Hebrew Bible, which he contends idealizes a kind of decentralized, anarchistic theocracy, as well as contains a strong critique of worldly political power and associated institutions, and generally portrays these as opposed to God's will.

As a prime example of Ellul's position, the portrayal of the state's dual nature is taken to a point in his association of the state with the beast of Revelation 13, as well as the city, or civilization, with the great Babylon of Revelation 17 and 18, which is there said to ride upon the beast. The Biblical portrayal of the beast is explicitly described as making war on and conquering the saints, yet is being allowed to do this, and is given authority over all tribes, peoples, languages, and nations, is clearly useful in relation to Ellul's description of the worldly powers and his characterization of them as an entity with a fundamentally dual nature:

And he said to me, "The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages. And the ten horns that you saw, they and the beast will hate the whore; they will make her desolate and naked; they will devour her flesh and burn her up with fire. For God has put it into their hearts to carry out his purpose by agreeing to give their kingdom to the beast, until the words of God will be fulfilled. The woman you saw is the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (Revelation 17:15-18).

This text from Revelation 17 tells of the great city (which earlier is proclaimed to ride upon the beast), the city that rules the kings of the earth, which will then in turn be hated and destroyed by the beast and the kings together, to the fulfilment of God's word. It obviously lends itself to Ellul's favored interpretation, and is also well aligned with the general primitivist position about the destructive internal dynamics of civilization as such.

At this point, one obvious question is how one might reconcile Ellul's more complex analysis of the state and civilization with such New Testament texts that have often been interpreted as advocating a more clear-cut submission to the worldly powers. His basic response is that such an interpretation is simplistic when one takes into account the context of the texts in question, the general trend of the Biblical account, as well as the contrasting perspectives found elsewhere in the Bible.

The position that all worldly authority unconditionally should be submitted to is, according to Ellul, out of place with relation to the context of surrounding passages ostensibly supporting such an interpretation. Instead, he interprets texts such as Romans 13:1-7 about



applied charity, that is, how Christians according to Paul are supposed to love friends and neighbors, the strangers, the poor and the weak, and finally even enemies, after which, in Romans 13, the passage on worldly authorities is presented, implying their status as enemies:

In other words, Paul belongs to that Christian church which at the first is unanimously hostile to the state, to the imperial power, to the authorities, and in this text he is thus moderating that hostility. He is reminding Christians that the authorities are also people (there was no abstract concept of the state), people such as themselves, and that they must accept and respect them, too. At the same time Paul shows great restraint in this counsel. When he tells them to pay their dues – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue, respect to whom respect, honor to whom honor – we are rightly reminded of the answer of Jesus regarding the tax. Far more boldly Jesus claims that we owe neither respect nor honor to magistrates or the authorities. The only one whom we must fear is God. The only one to whom honor is due is God (1991: 80).

Again, Ellul's contention is that the general tendency of the Biblical accounts roughly vindicates his position – a position which can most accurately be regarded as a form of anarchism approaching moderate primitivism, the most important support for which is garnered from the gospels, especially certain of the central sayings of Jesus, or narrative episodes wherein he is portrayed. Ellul recounts a few of them as most important to his position: the temptation narrative in Matthew, Mark, and Luke; the render-unto-Caesar-saying in Mark; the discussion of who of the disciples is to be seated at the right and left hand of Jesus when he supposedly assumed worldly power in Matthew, as well as the trial narratives.

Considering the temptation episode, Ellul heavily emphasizes the fact that the Enemy is actually described as being in possession of the worldly riches mentioned; that it is literally said that the Enemy is in possession of all worldly power, of all that has to do with politics and political authority, and that this has been given to him. It has been given to him, and he gives it to whom he wills, according to the text in Luke. Ellul reads this as saying that those who hold political power have received it from the Enemy and depend upon him. Importantly, these statements are not disputed or denied by Jesus in the temptation narratives.

The dispute about greatness is also emphasized by Ellul, i.e., the situation where Zebedee's wife requests that her sons be seated at the right hand of Jesus when he supposedly would assume worldly, political power. His response concludes with the statement that the rulers of the nations lord over their people, that their great men exercise authority over the nations, and the admonition that it shall not be like this among the disciples of Jesus – that those among them who desire to be great disciples, must become servants and slaves, and eschew worldly authority.

Finally, there is the trial before Pilate, which Ellul discusses at length. His basic position is that Jesus at his trial reveals the emptiness and impotence of worldly power. Ellul presents a number of arguments to this effect. According to the first and foremost of these, the events of the trial are taken to show the futility and injustice of Roman law, the greatest legal system of any civilization, since all it accomplished was the Roman procurator's yielding to the mob and condemnation to death of an innocent for no valid reason whatsoever, as is even

recognized by Pilate himself. Jesus's participation in the trial is thus, in Ellul's view, not a sanctioning of the legal system of the Roman state, but rather an unveiling of the "injustice of what purports to be justice." Also, Ellul emphasizes how Jesus addresses the authorities with nothing but disdain and disregard, expressly accusing them of being an evil power (Luke 22:52-53), and how, in the Gospel of John, he clearly dissociates his kingdom from any form of worldly political power (John 18:36-37).

#### *Ellul and the Hebrew Bible*

Ellul also anchors his position in an exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. He argues that the Hebrew Bible idealizes a kind of decentralized, anarchistic theocracy, and that it contains a strong critique of worldly political power and associated institutions and generally portrays them as opposed to God's will. Two important texts he discusses in detail are the book of Samuel, wherein the institutionalization of the Israelite monarchy is portrayed, and Ecclesiastes, or Qoheleth, which he contends describes the pursuit of worldly power as inherently meaningless and its institutions as always corrupt. Regarding the book of Samuel, Ellul observes:

[The king] would take their sons and make soldiers of them. He would take their daughters for his harem or as domestic servants. He would impose taxes and confiscate the best lands. The people replied, however, that they did not care. They wanted a king. Samuel warned them again that they would cry out against this king. But nothing could be done (1991: 48-49).

Basically, Ellul gives us two fundamental observations regarding the Biblical accounts of the Israelite monarchy. The good kings, that are just and do not abuse their power, are always defeated by external enemies, and the kings that extend the nation's borders and win victories are always portrayed as unjust and immoral, including to various extents the great king David and his son Solomon. Secondly, the kings are generally accompanied by a prophet that represents the word of God, who is always in opposition to the royal power, whose narratives were obviously preserved and by all accounts were regarded as divinely inspired among the people.

#### *Summary of Ellul's Critique*

Civilization is, according to the Anarcho-primitivist viewpoint, approached as a contingent form of human society comprising certain set of institutions, which are associated with a set of severe problems that are, arguably, necessary consequences of these institutions as such. Ellul, in adopting a similar position, maintains that civilization has the character of both a moral and a metaphysical evil, since it is a material effect of original sin and a natural, fallen tendency of human societies, but we are also culpable for its entrenchment, spread, and effects – a characterization that is clearly supported by biblical exegesis, especially from the temptation narratives in the gospels and the trial before Pilate and the Sanhedrin. In the temptation accounts it is explicitly stated that the Evil One is in possession of the worldly political power and gives it to whomever he likes, something which Ellul emphasizes, and the trial narratives, according to Ellul, are permeated by Jesus's disdain and rejection of worldly power.

### The Response of Mainstream Christian Political Theology

How can one respond to this critique from the mainstream point of view of Christian political theology, as represented by, e.g., Augustine and Lewis? One can of course outright deny that civilization has any of the destructive entailments described earlier, but this is hardly a defensible position. One might also obviously criticize the particular exegesis Ellul supports, but if civilization indeed does have these destructive entailments, at least something must be conceded to Ellul by the mainstream political theologian – the Biblical traditions can hardly be taken to unequivocally and unconditionally support civilization and the state if these actually are wrought with severe, destructive consequences.

Thus, a compromise seems to be the reasonable way forward. This is also arguably the standard point of view with regard to Christian political theology throughout most of history. There are two basic types of arguments which can be advanced to counter Ellul's radical critique of worldly political power and the associated primitivist position: the Hobbesian argument that civilization is the lesser evil and therefore necessary, and arguments to the effect that civilization itself provides unique and utterly necessary goods. Lewis, if we return to him as a counterpoint, utilizes versions of both arguments throughout his political and ethical writings. He approaches the state as an aspect of, or even identical with, the general human community of neighbors commanded to love one another, and the violence inherent in the state as a necessary evil utilized to protect this community. From Lewis's point of view, civilization is thought of as *culture* – the fruit of our human endeavors to attain material, spiritual, and aesthetical goods.

Obviously, if the state and civilization are actually identified with the community as such, rather than contingent institutions however closely related to the community, the primitivist critique can never get off the ground. In response, however, it can plausibly be argued that this identity cannot be assumed, if for no other reason than the fact that stateless, non-hierarchical and non-civilized human societies have existed and still do exist. There are thus no plausible grounds to claim a necessary identity between society as human communities in general and civilization as previously defined.

If we begin with the lesser evil-response we are faced with the complex question of whether it can be effectively argued that the state and civilization are inevitable evils, for instance, as lesser evils, or as a necessary compromise to minimize the overall magnitude of evil. As was previously stated, virtually no one argues that the state and civilization are unequivocally good in itself. There is an obvious case to be made that these institutions bring much injustice, abuse, and corruption with them – and the role of industrial civilization in threatening the global eco-systems cannot, today, be seriously disputed. Thus, the lesser-evil response is really the only viable option for the traditionalist position and, it seems, the one that has generally been favored as far back as Augustine.

### Problems and Prospects of the Lesser-Evil Argument and the Ultimate Good-Response

The lesser-evil argument in principle seems capable of accepting Ellul's exegesis of both the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible, since it does not need to dispute the corrupt nature of worldly power and the essential futility of all merely human endeavors. The advocate of the lesser-evil argument can actually concede quite a lot to the primitivist, and even go so far as to

acknowledge that civilization itself is an atrocity and a hubristic affront to God much as the tower of Babel in the Genesis narrative, while still maintaining that civilization and the state are somehow necessary and useful in the grand scheme of things.

The major stumbling block for the advocate of the lesser-evil position is, in brief, the effective vindication of the Hobbesian nasty-brutish-and-short generalization, especially with regard to the darker aspects of contemporary industrial civilization. There seem to be two basic ways to attain such a vindication. Either it must be convincingly argued that the institutionalization of civilization and the state actually is less destructive and morally problematic when compared to *all* hypothetical forms of society in which they are absent, or, it must be argued that they exclusively provide access to some ultimate good in eschatological terms.

The former response entails a very strong claim, which seems entirely indefensible. Even if one were to soften the proposition significantly and maintain that civilization is the lesser evil if and only if its presence is preferable to all *plausibly realizable* alternative scenarios, the case is still very hard to make, if one seriously considers the circumstantial effects of the relevant institutions associated with civilization, and especially the effects of the three main attributes which were previously mentioned, i.e., exponential growth, hierarchical centralization and the associated projection of internal and external violence that ensues from the competition over resources between different states and between the levels in the hierarchy. Accordingly, if there are better forms of society than those characterized by the institutions of civilization, we ought arguably strive to realize these instead.

The ultimate-good response, that progress and civilization secures the availability of some unique, redeeming good not otherwise attainable, might well be a better option for the defender of civilization. This point of view is obviously a still prominent, defining cultural theme of late modernity found all over the political spectrum, perhaps most notably within the Marxist tradition.

This option is not at all available from the point of view of the orthodox Christian position, and is arguably very difficult to defend from the perspective of most theistic traditions, such as Islam or Judaism. Assuming the ultimate-good response as a defense of civilization, in spite of all its drawbacks, would namely undermine traditional forms of eschatology according to which salvation is not attainable within this world, but rather beyond it. If civilization can exclusively provide us with an ultimate, salvific good, such as according to the utopias of Marxism or the general Western myth of progress, a good that actually is capable of weighing up all its negative consequences, then there is no room for an exclusive, ultimate good of a theistic eschatology. Conversely, if the ultimate, vindictive good in some sense lies beyond this world, as most theists maintain, whatever utopia civilization might provide can never be an end in itself.

This is also, for instance, C. S. Lewis' clear conviction. He expresses this point in several of his writings, perhaps most notably in "On Living in an Atomic Age" from 1948, where he repudiates similar secular eschatologies as unfulfilling and finally meaningless, stating clearly that civilization as such, and whatever goods it may provide, can never be the final goal of human existence (1986: 73-80).

It might perhaps be contended that civilization is somehow necessary to secure the transcendent ultimate good of theistic eschatologies. Yet this would on the Abrahamic traditions imply that God's salvific grace is *necessarily* dependent upon a certain configuration of human society, whereas no such limitations are found within traditional soteriology. Moreover, the idea that God could absolutely not have saved humankind if we had not gone from picking fruit and hunting game to driving automobiles and building factory farms, provides irrevocable philosophical contradictions with regard to all traditional forms of theism, and again conflicts with such forms of soteriology that locates our *telos* in something independently transcendent.

### Conclusions: Mitigating Synergies

All this leaves the traditionalist Christian political theology in a difficult position in terms of its general support of the civilizational institutions, even assuming the compromise position. If the state and civilization are not obviously necessary evils, if the goods they provide do not clearly outweigh their drawbacks, and if they cannot be argued to be the only feasible path towards the ultimate good of a theistic eschatology, there seems to be a very strong case for something like Tolstoy and Ellul's refusal to participate in worldly politics and denial of support to the associated institutions, including those of modern industrial technology. Another factor of great importance is that any pragmatically oriented counter-position is impaired by the probably short remaining lifespan of modern industrial civilization due to resource constraints.

In other words, there is a strong argument to be made that Christians ought to support the Anarcho-primitivist critique, even if the exegetical line of reasoning as represented by Ellul is entirely unsuccessful. If there are plausibly attainable social arrangements which from the perspective of Christian ethics are less morally problematic than civilization as defined throughout this paper (e.g. less problematic with regard to the stewardship imperative or in terms of actual suffering or the violation of rights of persons and other beings), and if the unique goods exclusively promised by civilization are eschatologically irrelevant from the theological perspective of Christianity, there is a moral imperative to at least withdraw support from civilization as a form of society. Moreover, if civilization nonetheless cannot be sustainable, there are really no conceivable reasons to actually strive to maintain this particular institutional arrangement, and the inevitability of societal and economic overshoot and the ensuing collapse in that case clearly makes any support morally dubious.

Concerning modern civilization's remaining lifespan, there are several ominous observations to be made. Of greatest importance, however, is the situation in terms of available resources, and the necessity of greatly increasing the available reserves of especially fossil fuels, just to maintain current levels of economic activity through the coming decades – not to speak of actually sustaining economic growth. The inability to sustain economic growth is in itself catastrophic for modern civilization in that the substantial investments in terms of real material, resources, and energy needed to just maintain current industrial, economic, and societal infrastructure will not be made if there are no prospects for a return on these investments. However, due to the peaking or near-peaking of the production of several key resources, and the long since passed peak in discovery rate in terms of petroleum and coal, it

is obvious that current levels of economic activity cannot be maintained for many decades ahead (Hall: 334ff).

Priorities to preserve vital functions and infrastructure will naturally be made, yet such subsidies must come from somewhere, and without a robust economic growth supporting the investments, there will be few options as to where to acquire the needed financing. The result is that without meaningful economic growth, we will see an inevitable decline into a far less complex society, downgraded to a level of economic activity possible to maintain without the massive influx of energy and resources that industrial civilization has usurped (Tainter: 199).

There are in view of this situation a number of clear, potential benefits that can plausibly be ascribed to a Tolstoyan non-compliance applied to civilization and the associated institutions and technologies, both from the perspective of traditional Abrahamic theological ethics and from a purely pragmatic point of view. Abandoning technologies that effectively reproduce unsustainably resource-intensive economic growth and the entrenchment of institutional violence is obviously beneficial from a wide variety of political positions, and not particularly difficult to construe as morally imperative with regard to most types of ethics. Moreover, a refusal to comply with civilizational institutional arrangements whose effects are necessarily detrimental to the health of global eco-systems is clearly compatible with the Abrahamic notion of humankind's stewardship of creation.

From a wholly pragmatic point of view, the necessarily brief remaining life-span of growth-based industrial civilization with regard to resource depletion calls for alternative institutional arrangements capable of effectively providing means of sustenance and production for future societies. The primitivist values of radical conservationism and rejection of growth-based, centralized civilization and institutionalized violence in favor of ecologically sustainable and locally self-reliant means of production can plausibly provide a set of goals capable of focusing and generating the political will that is necessary for a transition sooner rather than later, into a less complex, sustainable state of society, hopefully mitigating violent political conflicts and the very worst of scarcity-related hardships.

In terms of synergy effects, it is clear that specifically Christianity, and generally the Abrahamic traditions, provide a moral imperative and a perspective according to which the preservation of human life as well as creation as such can be understood as inherently meaningful. This is something which the secular forms of primitivism or deep ecology arguably have been incapable of effectively contributing themselves. They generally exhibit nihilistic tendencies and lack a moral foundation according to which their goals can be construed as universally important and obligatory, which likely has impaired, and probably will keep hindering, the spread of their potentially fruitful ideas.

In contrast, Christianity and the Abrahamic traditions, aside from their fundamental compatibility with anarchism's critique of political power, provide an imperative for action and sacrifice according to which the preservation of creation has a clear intrinsic value, as well as a narrative of hope, which both hold whether or not efforts towards conservation and transition are at all likely to succeed, due to the transcendent eschatology of the Abrahamic traditions.

Anchoring an imperative to establish such alternative arrangements in Christian theology, and possibly Abrahamic theology in general, would thereby, from a purely pragmatist point of view, increase the likelihood that a meaningful and comparatively mild transition from industrial civilization to ecologically sustainable forms of society can be successful. Without such an anchoring, it is not very feasible that the requisite challenges to the dominant value-systems and worldviews underpinning growth-based civilization will at all be made. The robust ideological underpinnings of industrial society will in all likelihood work against the establishment of such alternative institutional arrangements that do not properly reflect these dominant value-systems and narratives.<sup>2</sup> In successfully establishing such alternative institutions, there must be a viable and clear alternative to the narratives of industrial civilization, in which regard Anarcho-primitivism itself can provide very little, whereas traditional Christianity brings a perfectly workable alternative narrative to the table, which moreover is already well-established in contemporary society.

Conversely, from the perspective of the Jewish and Christian traditions, the Anarcho-primitivist ethos actualizes certain fundamental principles inherent to the religious traditions, such as the principle of humankind's stewardship of creation and the distinction between the worldly and the holy, as well as the repudiation and prophetic critique of worldly politics, and could thereby serve to reaffirm the orthodox interpretations of these traditions. Collaboration between the two types of tradition therefore seems to potentially bear fruit from the perspective of both, with no obvious animosities between them other than the primitivists' general disavowal of organized religion, and the support for civilization and the state often expressed within the framework of Christian political theology. These obstacles seem surmountable in that Christianity's support of civilization and the state is not essential to the tradition, while primitivism's critique of religion exclusively targets the latter's contingent function as ideological support for civilizational institutions.

In the contemporary political situation where general institutional legitimacy is arguably in decline, and radical dissident groups are consolidating across the political spectrum, the importance in building alliances with a priority in safeguarding universal human dignity and the intrinsic value of our natural environment can probably not be overestimated. Approaching increasing disorder and instability, the necessity of equipping the political landscape of the future with a constructive and morally sound ethos upon which to build is obvious, even if the ascendant groups may have an unfamiliar character to many of us. The further exploration of the mutually beneficial synergies between Judaeo-Christian orthodoxy and the increasingly popular primitivist ethos originating with the radical green left is one possible means of securing such provisions, and should be duly considered.

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, this factor about social change or inertia is discussed by Ellul in a different context in terms of what he denotes *pre-propaganda* in his main work on the topic, such that the widely-disseminated pre-propaganda entrenching the value-systems of the dominant civilizational order renders them resistant to change, unless change can be anchored in other narratives of equal influence and distinction (1973: 70ff).

## Bibliography

Barth, Karl

1919 *Der Römerbrief*. Bern: G. A. Büschlin.

Black, Bob

1997 *Anarchy After Leftism*, Albany: Columbia Alternative Library Press.

Ceballos, Gerardo, Paul R. Ehrlich, Anthony Barnosky, Andrés Garcia, Robert Pringle, and Todd Palmer

2015 "Accelerated Modern Human-Induced Species Losses: Entering the Sixth Mass Extinction." *Science Advances* 1 (5).

Deutch, John. M., Charles W. Forsberg, Andrew C. Kadak, Mujid S. Kazimi, Ernest J.

Moniz, John, E. Parsons, Lara Pierpoint, and Du Yangbo

2009 *Update of the MIT 2003 Future of Nuclear Power*. Pennsylvania: MIT Energy Initiative, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Available online at <http://web.mit.edu/nuclearpower/pdf/nuclearpower-update2009.pdf>.

Ellul, Jacques

1969 *Violence – Reflections from a Christian Perspective*. New York: Seabury.

1973 *Propaganda*. New York: Random House.

1991 *Anarchy and Christianity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Freud, Sigmund

1930 *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag

Gelderloos, Peter

2005 "The Rise of Hierarchy." *The Anarchist Library*. Available online at <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-gelderloos-the-rise-of-hierarchy>.

Garrett, Timothy J.

2011 "How Persistent is Civilization Growth?" arXiv:1101.5635v1 [physics.soc-ph]. Available online at <http://arxiv.org/abs/1101.5635>.

Hall, Charles A. S., and Kent A. Klitgaard

2012 *Energy and the Wealth of Nations: Understanding the Biophysical Economy*. New York: Springer.

Heinberg, Richard

1997 "Was Civilization a Mistake?" Pp. 116-23 in *Against Civilization: Readings and Reflections*. Edited by John Zerzan. Los Angeles: Feral House.

Kalb, James

2017 "Catholics and the Revolutionary State." *Crisis Magazine* (June 6). Available online at <http://www.crisismagazine.com/2017/catholics-revolutionary-state>.



Lewis, C. S.

1944 *Mere Christianity*, London: Wm. Collins Sons & Co.

1986 *Present Concerns: A Compelling Collection of Timely, Journalistic Essays*. London: Harcourt.

Mander, Jerry

1992 *In the Absence of the Sacred: The Failure of Technology & the Survival of the Indian Nations*. San Francisco: Sierra Club.

OECD/IEA

2010 *World Energy Outlook 2010*. Paris: International Energy Agency.

Oxford English Dictionary Online

2017 "Civilization, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press. Available online at <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/33584?redirectedFrom=civilization&>

Tainter, Joseph

1988 *The Collapse of Complex Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zerzan, John

2008 *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization*. Los Angeles: Feral House.