

**Lee Hoinacki**

**Review of:  
The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament  
of Ivan Illich, as told to David Cayley, foreword  
by Charles Taylor, Toronto: Anansi Press,  
2004. 252 pp.**

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## **David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich* (Toronto: Anansi, 2005).**

Commenting on Ivan Illich's earlier books, some critics found Illich too judgmental, indeed, too condemnatory. Such critics, and others, too, may be surprised with what Illich reveals of his innermost feelings and thoughts in Cayley's new book. For example:

"Wherever I look for the roots of modernity, I find them in the attempts of the churches to institutionalize, legitimize, and manage Christian vocation" (Cayley, p. 48).

Ivan Illich believes that all of us live in the modern world, that is, in the Western European world.

Illich goes on to say:

The more I try to examine the present as an historical entity, the more it seems confusing, unbelievable, and incomprehensible. It forces me to accept a set of axioms for which I find no parallels in past societies and displays a puzzling kind of horror, cruelty, and degradation with no precedent in other historical epochs (Cayley, p. 60).

Before he died on December 2, 2002, Illich wanted to make a statement; he wished to say what lay deepest in his heart; he yearned to let all people know exactly where he stood. Cayley's book wonderfully fulfills Illich's requirements.

According to Illich the world, in the way St. John uses the term in his Gospel, is radically out of joint. Further, the Church, too, is profoundly out of joint. But "out of joint" is much too weak a metaphor.

Thinkers who look into our time agree. For example, William Pfaff expresses the contemporary situation in these words:

The second millennium closed with the intellectual, political, and moral possibilities of a belief in progress explored to the extreme and exhausted. In the new millennium, with God dead and history without purpose, except that which power can impose, we approach the Hobbesian universe. Or we move toward an even worse one, in which the Miltonian moral categories are invalidated: "Evil be thou my Good ... all good to me is lost." (The Bullet's Song: Romantic Violence and Utopia, p. 310)

In words Illich himself might have used, Czeslaw Milosz writes:

Horror is the law of the world of living creatures, and civilization is concerned with masking that truth. Literature and art refine and beautify, and if they were to depict reality naked, just as everyone suspects it is (although we defend ourselves against that knowledge), no one would be able to stand it. Western Europe can be accused of the deceit of civilization. (Milosz's ABC's, p. 39)

A philosopher much admired by Illich, Alasdair MacIntyre, agrees with such a pessimistic assessment, as seen, for example, in his book, After Virtue. Illich went on to say that he "refused to designate our time as post-Christian, and insisted on its being apocalyptic ... " (Cayley, p. 177). In Cayley's book, Illich is given the opportunity to detail his meanings.

For example, he unites the reality of the resurrection and the Church:

I live in the kairos in which the mystical body of Christ, through its own fault, is constantly being crucified ... . I am therefore expecting the resurrection of the Church from the humiliation, for which the Church itself must be blamed, of having gestated and brought forth the world of modernity. (Cayley, p. 175)

Reading this book, the believer -- and perhaps the non-believer, too -- sees that the triumph of homo economicus, and other so-called facts like globalization or the establishment of empire are really only epiphenomena. A much more important reality lies beneath them. In Illich's thought, the notion of contingency is essential that the world be, that anything exists.

In this book, Illich strikes through the various manifestations of evil, thought important by some thinkers, to reveal the horror of sin, the specificity of evil after the Incarnation. For him, sin has a distinctly personal character. Through his interpretation of the parables of the New Testament, he gives an unusual exegesis of the Good Samaritan story, dramatically detailing his idea of the optimum (God's grace seen and grasped in the Incarnation) and of the pessimum (what people have often done with God's gift). Cayley summarizes the theme of his interviews by the phrase: corruptio optimi quae est pessima (the corruption of the best is the worst).

In accord with such modern writers as Simone Weil, and basing himself on a tradition found most clearly and consistently in the Orthodox churches, Illich concludes that the truth of the folly of the Cross is best understood in the figure of the fool. In a sense, this is the essence of belief in Christianity.

Remaining in the realm of a believer, Illich goes on to speak about prophecy. In order to speak about the need for prophets in the Church today, I suspect he is "forced" to write about the anti-Christ. From Illich's comments I see an amazing and paradoxical combination appear: Just when the reality of the anti-Christ has more or less disappeared from serious Christian thought, historically the character becomes more important than ever before! Illich makes all this clear, convincing perhaps, partly through his remarks on the practices of the early Church and partly through his description of the last hours of Savonarola who was burned at the stake in 1498.

Illich's discussion of ethos and ethnos, virtue and Kantian-derived ethics, the importance of surprise, and the centrality of friendship (love, or philia) will be welcomed by all those concerned about the ravages of modernity.

As Stanley Hauerwas points out, moderns see themselves haunted by the problem of relativism (The Hauerwas Reader, p. 44). In his book, After Virtue, Alasdair MacIntyre shows pre-

cisely how Western philosophical thinking got us where we are today; he details the intellectual sources of relativism.

According to Charles Taylor, Illich changes the terms of the debate about Christianity and modernity. Illich says that modernity is neither the fulfillment nor the antithesis of Christianity, but its perversion (see Taylor's Forward in Cayley).

Given the troubles in the Church today, one can see the importance of Illich's views on the historical criminalization of sin. The bishops' misguided efforts to see sinful behavior as criminal behavior is to deny the reality of sin.

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