

Pieter Tijmes

IN MEMORIAM: IVAN ILLICH

Ivan Illich was an impressive person, at once intimidating, and receptive. He had access to the great of the world and the heroes of the mind, but the less powerful and famous had access to him. He gathered them around him, he associated with them; he inspired and supported them. He was a magician in their company, and he charmed them, even when they did not always understand him. They knew what he said was important even when they were not sure what he was saying. At his funeral in Bremen these friends put in their appearance and bid him adieu, participating in the rituals of church and graveyard.

Two things in the service were noticeable: the open invitation to those present to testify briefly to their relationship with Illich, and the reading of a letter written by Illich on the occasion of Helmut Becker's 70th birthday. In this letter Illich specifically objected to the modern loss of being able to die one's own death. In his own remembrance service, this reading was an appropriate witness to that for which Illich stood during his entire life.

Ivan Illich was born 1926 in Vienna. After the Anschluss of Austria with Germany, the Illich family took refuge in Italy because of his mother's Jewishness. He studied science and philosophy in Florence, and later theology at the Gregoriana in Rome. He followed the calling to become priest and in the 1950s the slums of New York became his field of pastoral activity. Later he founded the Centro Intercultural de Documentation (CIDOC) in Cuernavaca, Mexico. After extensive debates with the Vatican, he renounced all priestly functions in 1969. This did not reduce his attachment to the Gospel as enduring inspiration in his life.

Intrigued by his permanent rebellion against contemporary political and ecclesiastical affairs, I once asked whether he really believed in God in the traditional Trinitarian terms of the Church's creed. His answer was apodictic, foreclosing all objections: "Of course, God was father, otherwise I (Ivan) could not be your brother, and vice versa." I was reduced to silence, since I did not dare question our brotherhood while a guest in his home. But the point of my question to him, as an "avant-garde revolutionary," came from my puzzlement. His acute appreciation of secularization and the historicity of the Christian faith made me wonder about his view of traditional revealed truth. Then I had to live with his existential answer to my

intellectual question. It was an acutely Illichean answer, but not a response to the intention of my original concern.

Ivan Illich can be best described as a merciless critic of culture. He had no fixed station; on the contrary, he had a travelling existence. He taught at universities all over the world, especially in the United States and Germany. His early books, such as Celebration of Awareness, Deschooling Society, Tools for Conviviality, and Medical Nemesis, gave evidence of his keen eye for the discrepancies, inconsistencies, and irrationalities of our modern way of life. He designated capitalism as counter-productive. All that glitters is not gold. He wrapped his message in a vigorous and aggressive language. I could not always understand his energy, attacking people who conformed and adapted to our modern technological world. His special attention was directed to the pride of modernity, i.e., technology.

On the waves of the 1970s tide of social criticism, he became known among students. That Erich Fromm wrote a preface for one of his books made it plausible, to the outsider, that Illich belonged to the New Left. But from the beginning there was already an obvious difference in tone. He appreciated premodern ways of living in their particularity, and not just as preparatory trials that took their value from the modernity we achieved.

Let me return to Illich's 1992 letter to Becker. This document, "The Loss of World and Flesh," is representative of the last stage of his criticism of modernity. It mirrors his unremitting resistance, his refusal to surrender to what he saw as the corruption of modernity. He made clear that he had once known a world he loved, but that he had to live in a world he abhorred. In this love and aversion, he thinks of the world of the flesh, the body and the senses, in contrast with the world today where flesh, body, and senses evaporate and have less and less meaning in themselves. In a dramatic way, he writes about a break in history he had already experienced as a young man of twelve. It was, so to say, a proleptic experience of a disembodied future in which he found his own corporal existence set aside by history.

In articulating this break, Illich emphasizes the fact that in the modern world people have become different. They may still hear, look, and feel, but they do so no longer with natural bodies. They no longer experience the world in their flesh. This he describes as becoming disembodied or disincarnated. On the basis of his own books and articles, one

might add that it is due to technology that our bodies and flesh are no longer what they once were, but are more and more altered by the electronic media with which they engage and their bio-cybernetic transformations. In the letter itself, he does not explicitly examine the cause of the historical break, but only refers to students who are children of the era of Guernica, Bergen Belsen, Los Alamos, and the era of heart transplants, genocide, medicide. These students live on the opposite side of a great historical divide.

The letter is not so much a treatise as a deeply felt response to a friend. Contemporary ills and serious troubles from atom bombs to AIDS are pressed together in one breath. In one way or another these are, in his view, all related. He places himself as a transition figure, one who was born into a world of the flesh and the senses but now lives in a world of non-sense, among people alienated from the world and senses, as part of a generation that promoted the programmed helplessness of people. The abstractions of science and technology have taken over the place of the experience of the world and the self. Abstractions are like cushion-covers that supersede the traditional sensory perception.

Illich's perceived break with the past coincides with the demise of Christianity. In some way, this is involved with the passing bimilleneal age of European Christianity. But his point in the letter is not, in the first place, that the Christian faith is fading away — at least he does not elaborate on this issue. For an deeper understanding of the relationship between his Christian faith and criticism of culture, I have to quote Barbara Duden, for whom "it is impossible to understand his thinking during the last twenty-five years without attention to the flesh." According to Duden, Illich

treats the flesh apophatically, and the clearer this becomes the better I understand that for him the flesh orients one inexorably toward the Incarnation, toward the mystery in the world of his faith, and ultimately toward the Cross.... [For Illich] the tradition of Western medicine [cannot] be grasped without reference to the Cross and its denial [since], after all, the rituals fostering the myths of disincarnation — be they medical, hygienic, or other — [must also be] understood as cultural denials of the Incarnation in a society that has grown out of the Christian West. (Barbara Duden, "The Quest for Past Somatics," in Lee Hoinacki and Carl Mitcham, eds., The Challenges of Ivan Illich [Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002], pp. 220-221)

The reading of Illich's letter evoked a world full of nostalgia and struggle, and he ends with the words: “In a world hostile to death, we do not prepare for passing away but for dying intransitively. On the occasion of your 70th birthday, let us celebrate that friendship in which we want to praise God for the sensual reality of the world, even by taking leave of it.”

Ivan Illich had strong views that were often not easily accessible. They were provocative, because they did not harmonize with our knowledge of past and present. Unfortunately, the time is over when we can still ask him for clarification. We have to judge for ourselves about the plausibility of his vision. His contributions to the understanding of our world undoubtedly rest with his observations of trends that have to do with our orientation in the world, and he often speaks as if dichotomies such as embodiment and disembodiment, worldliness and unworldliness, necessarily and always exclude each other. Yet it is the task of philosophy to discover what different experiences have in common. Even theology should, in my view, have a say in this debate. Illich cannot be better honoured than by a critical examination of his historical intuitions. The heritage of his ideas is now a departure for our own reflections on technology and modernity — or, as it may be, post-modernity.

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