

Apocalypse Now!
A Reevaluation of the Thought of Ivan Illich
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In his masterful and comprehensive study recently published by Penn State University Press, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey*,¹ David Cayley brings to life, and restores to his proper place as one of the seminal thinkers of our time, a quixotic and unclassifiable scholar whose true worth has arguably never been recognized. A globetrotter whose pilgrimage took him from Vienna to Dalmatia to Florence to Rome to Puerto Rico to Mexico and to the world, a Catholic priest who renounced his ministry so as not to be a sign of division, a short-lived darling of the New Left in the 1960s later tagged by some as a reactionary and a misogynist, a gadfly revered by some and dismissed by others, Illich spent the last decades of his life outside of the public realm, all the while continuing his personal quest to understand the times in which he lived against the background of the history of Western civilization.

It must be admitted that the reasons for this eclipse lay in part with Illich himself, in the “moving viewpoint” which characterized his work, and in his concomitant unwillingness to commit to paper, or even to audiotape or film, notions which taken out of context could easily seem caricatures. His own penchant lay at the opposite extreme from a spirit of system. Every article or book he wrote, each phase of his life, seemed to open up brand-new avenues. He

1 David Cayley, *Ivan Illich: An Intellectual Journey* (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), references henceforth given in the body of the text as C followed by the page numbers.

threw off intuitions like a flint giving off sparks each time it was struck; he himself probably was not completely aware of the unity of his thought, since it lay far below consciousness. And yet unity indeed there was: Cayley's outstanding gift to us, in what was obviously a labor of love, is to make that unity patent, and in so doing to allow us to continue in some sense Illich's endeavor, to reveal the roots of modernity and so to help us go beyond the impasses to which it has brought us, in spite of all its obvious benefits and its glittering promises.

In the following pages, I would like to attempt to follow up one aspect of Illich's thought, clearly a central one, as Cayley makes perfectly clear, but at the same time one most liable to misconceptions. That aspect can be summarized in the word "apocalypse." For those without a biblical or theological background, which means over 99% of our contemporaries, the word is either incomprehensible, or else calls to mind cataclysmic images of devastation classified under the rubric "the end of the world." It is not for nothing that the title of this article was taken from a 1979 film dealing with the horrors of the Vietnam War. And of course the closing book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation, whose Greek title is *The Apocalypse of Saint John*, has often become the preferred text of marginal sects preaching death and destruction to those who do not convert to their outlook.

Illich himself was wary of the word apocalypse, according to Cayley, and justifiably so, only using it reluctantly at the end of his life. And yet I will attempt to show in these pages that, correctly understood, it recapitulates well the results of his lifelong reflections, notably in what concerns the evolution of Western—now globalized—society, under the influence of Christianity. It sheds a harsh but ultimately salutary light on our current predicament, and perhaps can indicate a modest way forward, first and foremost for those of us who still take seriously the message of the Messiah Jesus.

Radical and Prophet

Before we enter into the heart of the matter, it is necessary to clear the ground by dealing with a common criticism of Illich's thought. As Cayley shows at length in his book, Illich's multifaceted approach tended to puzzle even well-meaning critics (e.g. C434-41). "Those who...analyzed his work as a series of unsatisfactory 'solutions' to various contemporary 'problems' were often confused and dismayed once the masking effect of his exotic style and appearance wore off" (C439). A typical remark at the end of a presentation of his thought, after outlining all its positive aspects, is "all well and good, but he goes too far." Taken for a progressive social reformer on the one hand or a utopian mystic on the other, he could not fail to disappoint. In fact, Illich was a radical in the truest sense of the term. Usually employed today to define an extremist concerned with overthrowing the status quo, the word literally means "someone who goes to the roots." Illich was less interested in criticizing current aberrations or suggesting stopgap solutions than in penetrating beneath the surface of social institutions to lay bare the assumptions that allowed them to function, which were generally very different from what those involved in them imagined. Does compulsory schooling really exist to create a population of knowledgeable and astute citizens? Does the medical industry serve to foster healthy men and women, so that it gradually becomes less needed? By going beneath the often unconscious myths that undergird social life and bringing their genealogy to light, Illich hoped to lead people to a new freedom of mind that would allow them to undertake the arduous work of rebuilding a society where a truly human life would become possible.

It should be emphasized that a radical outlook, as I have interpreted it, does not at all imply a rejection of tradition. On the contrary, it requires us to go back to those

traditions which have made us who we are to understand just how they have formed us. In an “age of information” when, for most people, the past no longer has any relevance—and even scarcely exists—this kind of traditionalism is radical in every sense of the term.

For Illich, the roots of many of our contemporary institutions and practices can be found in Christianity, notably in the transformation of the Church in the Middle Ages. He disagreed fundamentally with the common conception that explains modernity as essentially a question of people turning their back on their Christian roots in order to adopt a different worldview. While it is true that faith in the biblical God no longer motivates social priorities, the structures of our world to a great degree continue to mirror their Christian antecedents, but without God and Christ. To take one example, Illich considered the Church from the eleventh century on as “the modern state in embryo” (C380) and even “a prototype of the modern corporation” (C231). Illich was able to see what others missed because of his religious background and training; indeed, Cayley shows convincingly that Illich’s motivations and outlook from beginning to end were primarily spiritual and theological. If he refused to be considered a theologian for most of his career (C430-34), and preferred to assume the stance of the historian, that is because he did not want to speak from within Church institutions and from a position of authority, or address his insights to believers only. His permanent interest lay nonetheless in “doing theology in a new way” (C431) or even better, in preparing the ground for “the Church of the future” (C433-34) by “clearing away whatever impedes our openness to one another” and to God (C122).

In this sense, I would argue, Illich was an authentic *prophet*. This was an epithet he refused even more decisively than that of theologian, for he argued that, after Christ’s com-

ing, the time of prophecy was over, to be replaced by friendship (C389, 424-25). Nonetheless, there is a clear affinity between Illich's life and that of a man like Amos, the earliest prophet in the Hebrew Scriptures to have left a book behind him, some eight centuries before the Common Era. Amos was not a seer by training, but a herdsman and cultivator. He was taken by the Lord "from behind his flocks" and sent to the royal sanctuary of Bethel in the northern kingdom, at the other end of the country, to speak in God's name (Amos 7:14-15). With his eyes enlightened by God, Amos saw, behind its facade of apparent peace and prosperity, a society which was seriously ill. Having forgotten the source of its life, the relationship with a liberating God, that society was being undermined by the selfish quest for individual well-being and the consequent growing gap between rich and poor. The prophet relentlessly exposed the symptoms of this sickness and depicted the consequences that would not fail to follow. Amos was, in short, a true radical; his divinely inspired vision enabled him to see beyond reassuring appearances to the roots of nation's malaise, which would eventually rise to the surface and lead to disaster.

We do not need to invoke divine inspiration to explain Illich, but we find in him the same ability to go beneath the surface and discover unsuspected motivations that would lead one day to unforeseen and pernicious consequences, even in the relatively short term. Such individuals naturally seem extreme, and even unbalanced, to those who are at home within the status quo, however inhuman it may be. "[Illich] predicted in *Tools for Conviviality* that, should technology not be restrained and the 'balances' proper to nature and society restored, the consequence would be an increasingly 'uninhabitable' social and natural environment in which personal initiative would shrink, polarization would grow, 'all bridges to a normative past' would be broken, and 'the

world [would be] transform[ed]... into a treatment ward in which people are constantly taught, socialized, normalized, tested and reformed” (C21). In 1973 this would have seemed to most people an outlandish exaggeration, whereas today it reads simply like a description of the world we know.

A Theological Outlook

To understand Illich correctly, and so to learn from his diagnosis of our current situation, we therefore need to see it as born of a radical and prophetic outlook inspired by the Christian faith. This emphatically does not mean that his thinking is of interest only to committed believers; on the contrary, after an early period when he was active as a priest and addressed his writings to those within the Church, he more or less consciously turned to a wider audience. His work can be seen at most as “a preparation for faith or the creation of a clearing for faith” (C433) but, in a wider sense, it was an attempt to reexamine the roots of the present in the past “as a seedbed of so far unimagined possibilities” (C292), in order to find our way out of a dead-end. But if one does not need to espouse faith—which in any case is a gift that cannot be imposed—to understand Illich, one does need to take seriously the theological categories which undergirded his thinking.

In his examination of schooling, medicine and other social institutions, Illich gradually perceived a more general law: institutions originally developed for beneficial ends tend to grow larger and larger and, in the end, become counter-productive, “becoming so big, so presumptuous, and so total that they...begin to get in their own way and defeat their originally more limited purposes” (C2). He saw the roots of this in a refusal of limits and balance, a *hybris* which was a direct if unintended result of Christianity. The life and message of Jesus gave humanity a new freedom, “a space in which fi-

delity is freely chosen rather than coerced” (C378). The leaven of the Gospel gradually penetrated the dough of society and weakened traditional constraints based on fear, replacing them with the divine Spirit of mutual love. But when that Spirit that animated this life of freedom was rejected, forgotten or ignored, when “divine anarchy” was normalized, the best turned into the worst. “An unexampled freedom breaks the protective cultural shell that had kept even the most expansive ancient civilizations within certain bounds, and a civilization is erected whose appetite for improvement and expansion can find no limit” (C380).

We are currently living at an advanced stage of this process, with “every institution stretched past its proper limits and every person living beyond their capacity.” So “what better time to ask how the unlimited got loose in our world and how things might be put back within distinct bounds?” (C455). And even more urgently: what attitudes and practices can help us to live authentically and joyfully in a world run amok?

The Thinker as Apocalyptician

I have referred to Illich as a radical and a prophet, but I think his work is best understood—and this is in fact the main thesis of this article—as the author of an apocalypse. This is the notion, to my mind, that brings together all the different aspects of his thought. So it is now time to turn to a deeper understanding of apocalypse, as a way of recapitulating Illich’s insights, on the one hand, and of explaining our current straits on the other.

A first and essential step in this endeavor is to leave behind the current connotations of the word, and even the more traditional notions, extrapolated from certain biblical images taken out of context or taken literally. Here I part company to a certain extent from Cayley, who sees already in

the New Testament writings an ambivalence between what he refers to as “the historical and the mythological apocalypse.... The New Testament is pervaded by this mythological apocalypticism and Jesus’s often expressed preference for sinners and lost sheep counterbalanced by the prediction that those who fail to heed him will be thrown into ‘the outer darkness [where] men weep and gnash their teeth’” (C405). I grant the presence of such “mythological” images and language in the New Testament, although I would prefer the term “symbolic,” but I disagree with the notion that this implies any ambivalence or split consciousness in the New Testament authors. In Paul’s letters, for instance, the view of Jesus as our Passover sacrifice and the call to imitate his way of life are not mutually exclusive, but two sides of the same coin. Paul takes images current in his day and reinterprets them to illustrate the work of Christ. In those days, a sacrifice was a ritual offering, a gift made to a divinity. Jesus’s entire existence was one of self-giving; he gave himself to God by living for others. And that is the behavior he encourages the followers of Jesus to practice.

In the same way, the Book of Revelation employs a host of images available in the imagination of that time and place, taken in fact predominantly from the Hebrew Scriptures, and transforms them to express aspects of the life and teachings of Jesus, doing the same things the four gospels do, but in a very different style. Admittedly this makes interpretation difficult, since it can often appear to us as a kind of coded language for which we lack the key. Most people cannot readily grasp, for example, that “the great day of the wrath of the Lamb” (Rev 6:16-17) is in fact Good Friday (have you ever seen an angry lamb?), and that “washing one’s robes and making them white in the blood of the Lamb” (Rev 7:14) refers to the transformation and divinization of the believer’s life, begun in baptism and made possible through Jesus’s self-giving. The cryptic and at times gruesome character of

this book is undoubtedly why it could be used to justify all kinds of aberrant philosophies and what Cayley calls a mythological view of the Christian life.

Let us begin, then, by rejecting the notion that Christian apocalyptic writing is a literal description, more or less veiled, of the end of the world. Let us go further and assert that the dramatic, violent and often bizarre images in which it is clothed do not express its essence. This is what Cayley refers to as “mythological apocalypse,” absent in Illich. My thesis, however, is that this dimension is merely the outer garb and not the living body of the Biblical apocalypse. As a twentieth-century thinker, Illich has clothed his apocalypse in quite different attire, but the underlying reality remains the same. He has, to use Cayley’s terminology, written a historical apocalypse, one based on a careful reading of history in the light of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Ivan and John

So just what is an apocalypse, then? To focus my efforts, I will confine myself to the final book of the New Testament. Called in English the Book of Revelation and based on visions by a certain John on the isle of Patmos, it is in fact the only full-fledged apocalypse we have that is considered canonical. What is its purpose? The first words of an ancient text, the equivalent of our title, provide important information: *Apokalypsis Iēsou Christou*, the unveiling or revelation of Jesus Christ. We are immediately confronted with an enigma, one of the first of many in this book. Is this an objective genitive, in other words is Jesus the one who is revealed, or rather a subjective genitive, referring to Jesus who reveals something? Both meanings are possible, and in the present case it seems best to keep them together, in conformity with the overall style of the work.

The Book of Revelation thus intends to show us, first

of all, who Jesus is. It does this, however, not by telling stories of his life, as in the four gospels, but by applying images from the Hebrew Scriptures to Jesus. Jesus is, for example, “the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Rev 1:5). Illich, for his part, uses modern categories to help people understand the founder of Christianity, such as “anarchist savior,” “the Powerless One,” “a dropout from power and money,” “a conscientious objector to force” (C401), “a major disturber and fool” (C359). But, like the Book of Revelation, Illich spends relatively little time on this aspect of things. Like the Book of Revelation again, he is more concerned with the *effects* of Jesus’s coming on human history. Jesus reveals the deepest significance of human life, and human life is eminently historical, in other words an ongoing life in time.

When, as Christians believe, after centuries of preparation the divine fully entered human history in the Man from Nazareth, things could never be the same again. To return to one of Jesus’s own key images (Matt 13:33), the leaven has now been put into the dough and an irreversible process of transformation has begun. Slowly but surely, a world comes to an end. When John of Patmos describes the end of this world, he does so using biblical images of cosmic convulsions. For example:

There was a great earthquake, and the sun became like a sack of goat hair, and the whole moon turned blood-red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as a fig-tree drops its fruit when shaken by a strong wind. (Rev 6:12-13)

This occurs on “the great day of the wrath of the Lamb,” which we have already seen is an a coded description of Christ’s death on the cross (cf. Matt 27:51ff), the true beginning of the end of the old world. The notion of God’s “wrath” or “anger” is a shortcut to denote the divine response to evil: Jesus,

however, responds to evil by taking it upon himself and by loving in return, thus putting an end to the spiral of violence once and for all. We could thus say that the gift he makes of his life is violence done to violence, “the destruction of those who are destroying the earth” (Rev 11:18).

In short, what is described in the Book of Revelation is not “the end of *the* world” but “the end of *a* world,” the implosion of a society that clings to its privileges and refuses to open itself to the Newness of God. From a different perspective and using a wholly different language, is not Illich attempting to indicate the same thing? Saint John had his visions at a time when Christians were a tiny besieged minority at the heart of the powerful Roman Empire. That empire realized, instinctively, that this new teaching was anathema to it, and tried—unsuccessfully as it turned out—to stamp it out. Illich, benefiting from two thousand years of distance from the key Event, was able more clearly to analyze the process by which the seeming acceptance of the Christian message contained in fact the seeds of its rejection. The gift of freedom in the Spirit offered by Christ made a choice necessary and possible. Illich explores at length how this opened the door to a kind of evil which was previously unknown, the corruption or perversion of the best which is the worst. Attempting to transform the gift into a norm, “a gratuitous and free choice [into] an ideology and an idealism” (C358), Christendom set the stage for the greatest of all betrayals—the use of the freedom and power bequeathed by Christ for human aggrandizement. It made a new kind of society possible, one restrained by nothing but its own thirsts in achieving its self-centered ends, a world without balance and without limits, but also without surprises. To quote Cayley once again: we are “watching the current emergence of what Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari calls *Homo Deus*—a humanity now remaking creation after its own image, as God once made us.

Is it imaginable that Man could have become God, as Harari's title says, without God first condescending to become Man?" (C 363).

If we look beyond Illich's analysis and critique of particular social institutions and the ideologies that motivate them and make them impervious to change, we find the same view of history as in the Book of Revelation. In this specific sense, quite different from the popular understanding of the term, Illich's work is an apocalypse. Biblical revelation, culminating in the Christian Gospel, deactivated the safeguards that pre-Christian civilizations had unconsciously erected to protect themselves from the uncontrollable energy of the sacred, and replaced it with the freedom to love. But this freedom involved a choice; it could be used to love, but also to overthrow all norms and attempt to recreate humanity in its own image. Fearlessness became recklessness (C260). To express it schematically in visible terms (see C257-60): ancient civilizations tried to control the sacred by, among other things, capturing it in images ("idols"). In Israel these images were forbidden; God took the initiative to communicate by his Word, not at the disposal of human beings. In Jesus the Word became flesh, and so a new kind of image became possible—the icon. All icons, theologically speaking, are a development of the face of Christ and a window on to eternity. But where faith in the Risen Lord disappeared, an empty space opened up that anything could fill. Today, we live in a world of "manufactured appearances" and "pseudo-events" (C260), increasingly at the mercy of electronic media that spirit us off into a virtual un-reality.

Apocalyptic Time

A major confusion in interpretations of the Book of Revelation across the centuries, which arguably lies at the root of the popular misconceptions, is the notion that the

book is exclusively concerned with the future, the putative “end of the world.” Most often this end-time is felt to be imminent, and after two thousand years there are still people claiming that it is on the verge of erupting, despite the fact that every previous claim of this sort was ultimately found to be spurious. John based his vision of Babylon on the Roman Empire of his time, but that empire did not disappear in the twinkling of an eye, to be replaced by God’s Kingdom come in glory. So it is important to investigate more closely the notion of apocalyptic time.

First of all, time admittedly does play an important role in the visions of John of Patmos. Something literally earth-shattering is in process, namely the destruction of the old world and the coming of the new. The progress is not fully linear, however; there are twists and turns and the same realities are seen, so to speak, from different angles. A principal way of expressing this progression is by the use of sevens: seven seals opened one after the other, seven trumpets ringing out, seven bowls pouring their contents on the earth. And there is a clear note of urgency that runs through the entire work: “what must soon take place” (Rev 1:1; 22:6), “the time is at hand” (Rev 1:3), “I am coming soon” (Rev 22:12,20).

Some people have drawn the conclusion from all this that apocalyptic thought is based on a colossal misunderstanding, not to say a delusion. They maintain that the early Christians thought the return of Christ in glory was imminent, and were proven wrong. The Book of Revelation, consequently, is interesting merely as a quaint relic of a road not taken. If we do not accept this solution, however, is there another way to understand the work? Indeed there is, and it consists in the realization that while apocalyptic time is related to our human historical chronology, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the two. Apocalyptic time takes as its starting-point the entry of God into human history, and

depicts the way the consequences of this work themselves out over time. It is not concerned primarily with the final stage of this process, but with the process itself. At the heart of this process is the Event of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, which is both a culmination—God has given everything in giving his Son—and a new beginning, because this Presence exercises a transformative effect upon the universe. The final act of this process lies outside the realm of human calculation: “No one knows the day nor the hour” (Matt 24:36; cf. Rev. 3:3). The note of urgency in the apocalyptic writings refers not to a date on our calendars, but to the importance of the choice to be made for or against Christ in the present moment. There is no time to waste: when we understand what God is doing, we realize that this must be the absolute priority, calling for nothing less than a commitment of our entire being.

Apocalyptic time, then, is not a matter of abstruse calculations to determine when human history will come to an end. It is rather a vision of our human history informed by the entry of the divine, so that we can see our world with different eyes and act in consequence. This should help us to resolve the dichotomy which Cayley sees when he distinguishes an “apocalyptic” and a “non-apocalyptic” dimension in the thought of Illich. In his sociological and historical studies, Illich explored the effects of the Gospel for Western, now globalized society. He emphasized one particular consequence: the appearance of a new kind of evil that consisted in turning one’s back on Christ and perverting the freedom bequeathed by him (C359-63). Following Saint Paul, he spoke of “the mystery of evil,” recapitulated in the symbol of the anti-Christ. Writing a generation ago, he felt that the contemporary world had already gone very far in this direction, although the current situation had been prepared for many centuries. One can only imagine what he would have said

had he been alive today, in a world where the specter of a putative new virus has led to widespread panic and concomitant blind obedience to so-called experts and authorities in the name of a deified Science, and where shifts in the balance of power between great nations risks overturning the post-1989 status quo.

To qualify our time, based on Illich's analysis, as apocalyptic, may be a handy shortcut, but it is essentially inexact. It is more correct to say that "history 'on the far side of the cross' is inevitably apocalyptic—it tends to the ever fuller revelation of this 'mystery of evil' that the Incarnation, once mistaken, sets in motion" (C387). If today this revelation or unveiling is becoming more flagrant, then in that sense one might say that we live in an apocalyptic age. But in reality, to say it once again, it is the entire process that is an apocalypse, not its final stages.

Come Out of Her, My People!

That is why there is no contradiction between an apocalyptic interpretation of history, rightly understood, and the importance of living out the Gospel in the simple events of everyday life, what Cayley refers to as Illich's non-apocalyptic side. It should be emphasized that the Book of Revelation illuminates the dynamics of history in the light of Christ's coming not to sow fear and panic, a common misconception—it is not addressed to enemies of the Gospel—but rather to give hope to beleaguered believers in Christ, impressed and disoriented by the power of Rome, and to convince them that this is not the last word: in spite of everything, the God of Jesus is the one in charge of history. Against the traditional view that the work was written at a time of widespread persecution, scholars today recognize that the cultural atmosphere of John's Apocalypse was closer to that of our time. In the face of an imposing and well-organized civilization, with its trea-

tures of art and architecture, magnificent temples with lavish ceremonies, a matchless legal and political organization, all this protected by a huge and mighty army, proud of its victories, small groups of Christians could be tempted to doubt the well-foundedness of their faith. Was the vision expressed in the Gospel realistic, or simply a wild dream? Perhaps, after all, it was a mistake to leave a “normal life” behind to follow that itinerant preacher, put to death by Roman justice in a faraway corner of the Empire.

The Book of Revelation explicitly intends to counteract this temptation. It makes use of visionary language to describe an alternate reality, that of faith. These visions show that, in spite of misleading appearances, the God revealed by the Messiah Jesus is truly the Sovereign Lord of the universe and of human history. John refers to the wider society as “Babylon,” and describes it as a majestic palace built on sand, destined to collapse in the tempests of history “in a single day” (Rev 18:8) or even “in one hour” (Rev 18:10,17,19). To an infatuation with illusory appearances, the seer opposes “the perseverance and faith of the saints” (Rev 13:10). Their patient endurance will ultimately win out (Rev 14:12); those who are faithful to the end will receive the crown of life (Rev 2:10).

How should believers express their faithfulness to Christ in the midst of a hostile or indifferent society? In John’s Apocalypse, a voice from heaven provides the answer in no uncertain terms: “Come out, my people, away from her, so that you may have no complicity in her sins and will not share in the calamities that befall her!” (Rev 18:4). These words resemble those found in prophetic parallels to this text (cf. Jer 50:8; 51:6,45; Isa 48:20; 52:11), but their meaning is, as usual, quite different. John is not advising the Christian community of Rome, or Jerusalem, to emigrate to another location, nor is he telling city-dwellers to flee into the coun-

tryside. Since he sees Babylon everywhere, he is in fact proposing what we could call an “inward migration.” Believers are being asked to remember that their primary allegiance is to another commonwealth, to the Reign of God, and consequently to detach themselves from the values of a world doomed to destruction. If they cling to what the surrounding society offers, their minds and hearts will become entrapped, and they will go down in the orgy of self-destruction that will ultimately engulf that world. The call to leave Babylon is an insistent reminder to the followers of Christ first and foremost to seek God’s Kingdom and its justice (cf. Matt 6:33), in other words to acknowledge the one true God as the Source of their life and to cultivate the kinds of alternative human relationships that follow from this recognition. This implies of necessity maintaining a critical distance with respect to the claims of the society and culture in which they find themselves. The role of believers is to be “an other-worldly community that lives in the world” (C403).

I would argue that here we have a clear parallel with Illich’s own way of encouraging people to live out their convictions. Those who see through the illusory veils of an ever more inhuman society should begin at once, in the present moment (C406-07), to witness to an alternative reality, celebrating spaces of what he called conviviality, a “realm of spontaneity and gift, friendship and mutual aid, the unplanned and the ungoverned” (C452; cf. 393). He called for a foolish faith, open to surprises (C359): “our hope of salvation lies in our being surprised by the Other” (C267-71). Illich saw this as already laying the foundations of a “‘post-religious’ Church” (C461) based on friendship (C417-23), involving new forms of askesis or renunciation (C260-62, 302-3, 422), not taking the shape of a multinational corporation but incarnate in small groups of women and men rooted in prayer and silence, gathering periodically around a table for cele-

bration and for “common investigation” (C422). Cayley uses two pregnant images to point to a renewed Christianity: “an incipient neo-monastic culture that will conserve tradition through the new age [of plasticity]” (C25), and a group of clowns performing on the stage of history where a tragedy is unfolding (C416). Like the Book of Revelation, Illich spent most of his time analyzing the consequences of unfaithfulness to the Gospel and not in describing an alternative, since he felt that this could only spring up spontaneously in the present moment (C90-93). But, again like John’s Apocalypse, his basic attitude was one of hope, rooted not in human perfectibility but in the resurrection of Christ, constantly accessible to us in God’s today.

Apocalypse Now!

To conclude these reflections, I would like to return to the title of this article, which hopefully can now be understood as a play on words that leads us to the heart of the life and work of Ivan Illich.

In the first place, my contention here has been that all the books, articles, talks and conversations of that often disconcerting thinker can be summed up in one word. They constitute an apocalypse for our time. This does not mean, as I hope the previous pages have made clear, a prophecy of doom, still less a call for violent change, but rather an exposition of the consequences of the entry of God into human history, a history that tends not only to forget God, but to use the gift of divine freedom to shore up its own apostasy. Apocalyptic wrath is, in the final analysis, a veil covering a deep sorrow at the refusal of human beings to seek their own true good, their true happiness. Illich was familiar with this attitude, using the traditional term “contrition” for it in his exposition of the parable of the Good Samaritan (C357). As we have seen, Illich was reluctant to use the word “apocalypse” to characterize his analysis, un-

doubtedly because of its perversion in the course of the ages. He certainly did not wish to be seen merely as a nay-sayer, and in this he bore a certain resemblance to a prophet like Jeremiah, a gentle man forced to proclaim God's judgment of his rebellious people: "Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the Lord has brought me insult and reproach all day long. [...] Cursed be the day I was born! [...] Why did I ever come out of the womb to see trouble and sorrow and to end my days in shame?" (Jer 20:8,14,18). But like Jeremiah, Illich could not remain silent in the face of the threat to humanity of a "worldwide society in which all proportions lie in ruins, replaced by Lego-like 'values' that can be reconfigured at will" (C384). He was led to decry modernity as an "inverted faith" (C385) where a new form of evil had run rampant, opening the possibility of "a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity" (C 384).

At the same time, Illich's life and thought are in a direct line from the New Testament writings, including its final book, insofar as they are ultimately an act of faith and hope made possible by the same Incarnation that has opened the way to such deep perversion. They call us to return to the past "as a seedbed of so far unimagined possibilities" (C292), so that we can be open, here and now, to the inbreaking of the Kingdom, which always comes as a surprise, which we can celebrate but never possess, and which finds its clearest expression in an inclusive friendship.

If the reflections in these pages are accurate, then, Ivan Illich reveals himself not only as a brilliant thinker who sheds light on the contradictions of modernity and calls for a more human world, but as a believer in the God of Jesus Christ who is a fitting successor of the early disciples. He returns to the Christian origins to reveal their true import and discovers in them new ground-breaking perspectives to orient us in the present-day. David Cayley deserves our heartfelt thanks for calling this to our attention.

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