Editor's letter

In June 2025, a group of about fifty gathered at the San Cerbone convent in Lucca, Italy, to discuss if *religion, faith, and philosophy* name conflicting ways of life. Some knew Illich personally, others only by hearsay. Some knew one another well; others had never met. This mix generated an openness to strangers and the unfamiliar. Meals were shared at long tables in the refectory. Discussions began in the garden outside the convent walls and continued among smaller groups inside.

Time took its time, scented by an atmosphere of friendship which Illich thought indispensable to any truthful inquiry of the present. To clearly see the present one cannot be of it. Rather, one must be *with* one's time, be a contemporary of it, as Giorgio Agamben has observed.[1] The days in Lucca allowed one to be contemporary to the present instead of being drowned in it.

I imagine the setting in Lucca was not entirely dissimilar to that in Pistoia where, in 1997, Illich gave the closing keynote address at a conference on Girolamo Savonarola— a Dominican friar, who, in 1498, was accused of heresy and hanged. His speech, published here for the first time, was heroically transcribed and translated by Leonardo Eck-Glenewinkel. Heroically, because Eck-Glenewinkel's labor was doubled: once to transcribe extemporaneous speech into formatted text and then to translate from spoken Italian into

1 Giorgio Agamben, "What is the contemporary?", In *What is an Apparatus and other essays* (Stanford University Press, 2009).

Sajay Samuel, sajaysam@gmail.com
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spare English. He provides an extensive apparatus of footnotes to buttress Illich's talk—not as an academic conceit but as an invitation to further explore what seems elliptical and sometimes enigmatic in Illich's speech.

The center of Illich's talk lies in his striking claim that *"the time for prophecy is past."* If prophecy is just a churchy word for foretelling the future, for prediction, then Illich is obviously wrong. For instance, the titans of Silicon Valley urge us to have faith in techno-science so they can accelerate the coming kingdom of heaven.[2] And in the everyday reality they have done so much to shape, AI predictions, weather forecasts, and risk calculations function as raw materials for financialized capitalism.

Eck-Glenewinkel's commentary on Illich's talk clarifies what he was after. In the biblical and patristic traditions, says Eck-Glenewinkel, prophecy does not refer to foreseeing the future but revealing the present. Accordingly, it is the very notion of a "future" that makes prophecy—seeing the present—impossible. To say the future is a 'blank canvas' is to already say too much. For the modern mind, the future is not a canvas but a formless nothing to be shaped by human will. According to the historian Paulo Prodi, to whose argument Illich was indebted, the notion of the future as a programmable nothing stems from two ideas —utopia and revolution. In the sixteenth century, utopia gave form to "no-place" or empty space. Similarly, the eighteenth-century idea of revolution made societal renewal or rebirth plausible. Forged by utopia and revolution, the future is "what you make of it," as many American children are taught.

It is against this backdrop that Savonarola appears as the last prophet: he denounces the world while accepting it with a bowed head. After him, diagnoses of the present have

2 Peter Thiel, "Against Edenism," *First Things,* June 1, 2015 (https://firstthings.com/against-edenism/)

almost always been accompanied by the desire to change the world. In this way, Illich's pronouncement in Pistoia is a recognition that prophecy—the clear-eyed seeing of the present without utopian escape or revolutionary renewal—is no longer possible. For Illich, only friendship remains for those who wish to so inhabit the present. Only friendship—vexatious and demanding—can free the believer, and perhaps also the unbeliever, from being consumed by the present or captured by the future.

The next set of essays responds directly to the theme of this issue. Samuel Sonderhoff traces the Roman roots of *religio* and explains why Illich hesitated to call himself a religious man. Since antiquity, *religio* has signified the man-made boundaries that separate the divine from the human sphere. Sonderhoff argues that both those who seek to preserve boundaries and those who seek to abolish them are mired in the present. Giovanna Morelli examines the post-secular moment when all boundaries are sought to be effaced, asking whether this confuses the distinction between religion, faith, and philosophy. Morelli suggests a revived philosophical *askesis* to discern the difference between spiritual hunger and institutionalized forms of transcendence. Wes Avram turns to the parable of the Good Samaritan to explore the unstable heartbeat of Christian life. He shows how Illich's reading of the Samaritan exposes the diastole of freedom from social conventions and the systole of institutional habits that domesticate it. Christian life, Avram argues, oscillates between these extremes.

The next set of essays address the dispositions that marked Illich's way of being contemporary. Neto Leão not only argues that a life lived in fidelity to an event is distinct from a philosophical or religious life but also that St. Paul and Illich were contemporaries precisely because each was not of his time. Simon Ravenscroft's essay on Illich's theological

indirectness examines how Illich's style—his refusal to systematize, his reliance on anecdote and parable—is not an affectation but a stance. It embodies his openness to surprise. In his essay on gratuitous relations, Oscar Krüger places Illich's reflections within a broader debate on money, religion, and gift. Rather than opposing gift and money, as is usual today, Krüger shows how Illich sought to inhabit the tension between them, resisting both the romantic and functionalist justification of modern institutions. Tobias Roberts argues that Illich's "theology of surprise" enables him to see the vernacular—ways of inhabiting the present which are not oriented to a future. In their different ways, all the essays assembled here suggest that surprise, gratuity, and friendship are not concepts to be mastered but rather ways of being open to what is already at hand.

Robert's grasp of Illich as "errant pilgrim" prepares for the final contribution to this issue's theme. John Kurien recounts meeting Illich in Kerala, India in the early 1970s. He remembers Illich as a "wandering monk" and, in his words, a "barefoot prophet." But the prophet he describes is neither a visionary committed to shaping the future nor a foreteller predicting what lies ahead. Instead, it is Illich's distance from the present that freed him to see in it what others overlooked. What impressed Kurien was Illich's resulting attention to the vernacular: how fishermen understood the relationship between wind and sail, how they organized their work; how communities built their own libraries and shared what they had learned. In Kurien's account we glimpse a form of life that does not seek to change the world but to see it as it is. Illich—wayfarer, pilgrim, monk—refused to be overshadowed by the future or drowned in the present by remaining contemporary to it.

The translation by André Ribeiro and Neto Leão is of Illich's 1966 essay titled "Concerning Aesthetic and Religious

Experience" published in *The Powerless Church and other selected writings, 1955-1985*. By serendipity, that essay has direct bearing on the question of the relationship, if any, between religion, faith, and philosophy.

This issue has a new section, titled "Comments." It was sparked by Jose-Antonio Ullate's objections to Renee Uribe's essay on the Church as "she" and "it" which was published in the previous issue. I solicited Ullate's note and asked Uribe to respond. They generously agreed to share their discussion.

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State College, PA