

When the last becomes the first: Ivan Illich and Saint Paul

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In this essay I take the call to explore the relation, if any, between philosophy, religion, and faith as an opportunity to articulate some thoughts concerning Saint Paul and Ivan Illich. These thoughts may find a coherent structure when confronted with two basic questions. First, can Ivan Illich be considered a contemporary of St. Paul? Second, by defining himself as a ‘man of faith’, was Illich affirming his contemporaneity with St. Paul?

According to Giorgio Agamben, contemporary does not mean to be in sync with one’s time. Rather, “contemporariness is, [] a singular relationship with one’s own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it.”¹ Being contemporary therefore implies not only being distant from the present but also, potentially, being close to the past. The suspension of homogeneous linear time, wherein first and last are the end points of an irreversible sequence, permits seeing the first and last as a relationship of proximity instead of distance. Accordingly, I propose the following: St. Paul is the first Christian and Ivan Illich is the last.

However, it is false to refer to Paul as the first Christian in either chronological or linguistic terms. While he undoubtedly played a significant role in the first decades after Christ, he was not the first believer. Furthermore, Paul never explicitly labelled himself or the brothers and sisters who became believers as Christians. Notably, the term “Christian” does not

1 Giorgio Agamben, What is the contemporary, in *What is an apparatus and other essay*, Stanford University Press, 2009, p.41.

appear in any of his epistles. It is Luke who records in the Acts of the Apostles that the disciples were initially referred to as Christians in Antioch. Saul, who would later become Paul, was among them. (Acts 11,26). The second occurrence of the word “Christian” also appears in Acts, in the context of Paul’s appearance before King Herod Agrippa II in Caesarea.

Paul, a Roman citizen, sought to be tried in Rome because he was apprehensive about getting an unfair trial in Judea. The governor Festus arranged a hearing with the King since he found it unreasonable to send a prisoner to Rome without specifying the charges against him. After two years of incarceration, Paul was finally summoned to be heard before the king and his sister Berenice.

Paul presented his defense against the false accusations of the Jews and recounted his story. The accounts follow his trajectory from a member of the Pharisees and persecutor of the followers of Christ until the event at the road to Damascus. Like the time at the Areopagus in Athens, Paul was interrupted by Festus when he announced the resurrection of the Messiah, even called insane. Paul remained steadfast and fearlessly declared that he could speak freely to the king. He concluded by inquiring if the king Agrippa believed the prophets. The king replied: “do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?” The core aspect of this narrative lies not in the second occurrence of the word “Christian” – the third and last occurrence is in the first letter of Peter – but rather in Paul’s response: “short time or long—I pray to God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains” (Acts 26,28-29).

Paul’s response to King Agrippa continues to resonate to this day. For the philosopher, Paul is the pioneering figure of Christianity who introduced a concept of time unknown to the ancient world, of which Illich represents the culmination. For the historian, long is the time between Paul and Illich

which renders any reference to their contemporaneity almost absurd. For the believer, short time or long are irrelevant, as eternal time is always at hand. And when what is at hand perdures, the last can become the first, except for the chains.

Thus, the question of *what it means* to become Paul is less significant than the question of *how to become* Paul. I think Illich knew that. I believe Illich became what Paul was. Despite the two millennia that separates Illich from Paul, I interpret Paul as the first Christian and Illich the last.

The event Christ

The “event Christ” has two foundational concrete realities that significantly marked its novelty and absurdity. Firstly, that he is the incarnation of God, the eternal Alpha and Omega, who declared “I am who I will be” to Moses while the burning bush remained unharmed, became flesh and dwelt in the fragility of human form. Secondly, that the enfleshed God suffered a horrendous death and after three days in the depths of a borrowed tomb rose in the same body that had been nailed to the cross. He then walked among his friends until he ascended to heaven.

I contend that both Saint Paul and Ivan Illich were faithful to the event Christ and in this way contemporaries. The first centered his discourse on the resurrection whereas the last on the incarnation. In the two-thousand-year gap separating their contemporaneity, Paul had to confront a fundamentally new reality: how to be faithful to the event Christ in action and words. Chronologically closer to the event, its freshness imposed the need to craft a new discourse that embodied the event itself as its core message. In the other hand, Illich’s fidelity to the event Christ made him see modernity as a perversion of it, where Christ’s message became the engine of a long process of institutionalizing gratuitous love. Consequently, he could assert to David Cayley that we are not living in a

post-Christian era but rather in “the most obviously Christian epoch, which might be quite close to the end of the world.”

If Paul is the archetype for the first Christians, I suggest Illich is the archetype of the last ones. For Badiou, an event is susceptible to being apprehended only in its relation to localized situations which have the potential to put such situations into motion. The event Christ, therefore, is the pure happening for both Paul and Illich, always in relation to their situations and time. Although they lived in different times and faced different situations both remained faithful to the event that can put into motion the eternal day which is always at hand. In this sense, they are con-temporaries to the event Christ. Therefore, I will begin my considerations of Saint Paul and conclude with Ivan Illich.

Paul: the first Christian

Paul was chosen to spread the [Christic] Way, as Saint Luke describes those who were following Christ (Acts 9), to all the nations (*ethne*), until the ends of the earth. Thus, the question of how he did so seem to be the most pertinent. The dichotomy neither Greek nor Jew offers an answer. I suggest we take this syntagm not as a reference to two peoples and their languages, customs, beliefs, and territories but, following Badiou, as names for contrasting *subjective dispositions*.² More precisely, Badiou argues that ‘Jew’ and ‘Greek’ name “regimes of discourse” that Paul considers to be the two coherent intellectual figures of the world he inhabits. In essence, the Jewish discourse is one of signs, which renders necessary the subjective figure of the prophet who reveals to the elect what is obscure and meant to be deciphered. On the other hand, the Greek discourse, is one of wisdom, which is based on the subjective figure of the wise man or

2 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the foundation of universalism*, Stanford University Press 2003, page 41.

the philosopher, who “appropriates the fixed order of the world, in the matching of the logos to being”. In contrast to the prophet and the philosopher, Paul’s gesture of spreading the Word entails “the man of faith” who “position[s] a third discourse, his own, in such a way as to render its complete originality apparent” (Badiou, 2003, p. 41).

One of the most remarkable historical realities regarding the texts that compose the New Testament is that all the letters of Paul predate any of the four canonical Gospels. In his letters, however, there is not a single parable of the redeemer, mentions to any stories or details of the biography of Jesus of Nazareth nor an account of his signs and miracles – no multiplication of fish and bread, no walking on water or giving sight to the blind, no transformation of water into wine. These narratives are not only non-existent in his letters but also seem to have been completely absent in Paul’s preaching.

Nevertheless, he was the first to write in Christic terms. It is widely accepted that the core of Paul’s preaching is the resurrection of Christ, “for if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain” (1 Corinthians 15:16,17).³ By centering his discourse on the pure event of the resurrection, Paul commits himself to it. As he stated, “for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). I believe Badiou provides a clear explanation of the stakes involved:

The announcement of the gospel is made without the wisdom of language “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” What does it mean for the event whose sign is the cross to be emptied of its power? Simply, that this event is of such a character as to render the philosophical logos incapable of declaring it. The underlying thesis is

3 See also 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and Romans 6:1-11. For accounts of Paul’s preaching where the highest point of the message is the resurrection, the cases of Paul in Athens and before king Agrippa II, see Acts 17:16-34 and 26:22-29 respectively.

that one of the phenomena by which one recognizes an event is that the former is like a point of the real [*point de réel*] that puts language into deadlock. This deadlock is folly (*moria*) for Greek discourse, which is a discourse of reason, and it is a scandal (*skandalon*) for Jewish discourse, which insists on a sign of divine power and sees in Christ nothing but weakness, abjection, and contemptible peripeteia. What imposes the invention of a new discourse, and of a subjectivity that is neither philosophical nor prophetic (the apostle), is precisely that it is only by means of such invention that the event finds a welcome and an existence in language. For established languages, it is inadmissible because it is genuinely unnamable.

Therefore, Christ is *a coming* that interrupts the previous regimes of discourse⁴. He is an event that happens to us, as it also happened to Paul. What constitutes the new subject who is faithful to the event is faith itself, which can only happen if the discourse announcing the event renounces prophetic and philosophical speech. To be what Paul was is to be faithful to the event Christ. To live the Way is to live relieved of law and logic and to celebrate the event aware that Christ is a coming, someone who happens to me. Although Paul's experience of the event Christ is, for the want of a better word, miraculous, only because it is unpronounceable or unsayable. Faith admits to neither logical proof nor religious signs. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of proofs that proves faith. What happens to us remains unpronounceable, what Badiou calls the fourth and hidden discourse.

How did Paul relieve himself from the Law? Imitating Christ, Paul did not destroy the Law but rendered it inoperative by neutralizing the dichotomy of Jew and Greek and creating

4 Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: the foundations of universalism*, Stanford University Press, 2003, page 48.

the space for a third and new subject, a third and new language. This becomes clear in Paul's short letter to Philemon.

Paul is imprisoned in Rome from where he writes to Philemon. The content of the letter is quite straightforward. A man called Onesimus was a runaway slave who belonged to the household of Philemon, his master. Onesimus became Paul's "child", as he refers to him, someone he "fathered" while they were both in prison. The letter is a plea to Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household no longer as a slave but as a brother in Christ. He states that, although he is bold enough in Christ to command Philemon to do his duty, he appeals to him on the basis of love, a gratuitous love. While sending Onesimus back to his household, Paul chooses a singular word to refer to the subject of the lawless relationship between one and another, as someone "whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels (σπλάγχνα)⁵."

Firstly, Paul addresses Philemon as a fellow laborer in Christ; secondly, he appeals to love to address a man whom Christ had happened to, a man who had chosen the Christic Way; thirdly, he refers to Onesimus as someone to whom he was drawn to from his bowels, a relation that can only be consummated in an act of gratuitous love. According to Badiou, the stirring towards another that is felt elementally only discloses a possibility; the work done to faithfully transform that possibility into actuality is named love and only those who declare it are bound to this love, which Paul calls a labor. Thus says Paul, "though I have all faith, so that I could

5 The Greek word σπλάγχνα, often translated as bowels or the inward parts, appears twelve times in the New Testament. The first occurrence is in Paul's letter to Philemon in the context of the relationship between Onesimus and Paul. All the others pertain to the synoptic Gospels, among which the Gospel of Luke in the parable of the Samaritan. This parable is paradigmatic at least among the Illich circle. It is well-known that both historians and theologians consider a close friendship between Paul and Luke. The Acts, written by Luke as a continuation of his Gospel, would have been based on several accounts of Paul. It is remarkable that these two men used the same word to refer to acts of gratuitous love.

remove mountains, and have not love, I am nothing (1 Corinthians 13:2). The assembly of those who belong to the Way, the Church, is made of fellow laborers, those who are faithful to the event, who accept the grace, the possibility of the consistency of love (Badiou, 2003, p. 92).

There is no universal law in Paul stating that every master should take his slave as a brother or sister. There is no attempt to institutionalize, to systematize or even to establish a permanent state of lawlessness among masters and slaves, wives and husbands, men and women. “But this I say, brothers and sisters, the time is short: it remains, that those who have wives should live as if they do not; And they that weep, as if they did not; and they that rejoice, as if they were not; and they that buy, as if it were not theirs to keep; And they that use this world, as not abusing it: for the fashion of this world passes away” (1 Corinthians 7:29-31). As Giorgio Agamben has remarked, the ‘as if’ of Saint Paul refers to the messianic concept of living in the present moment which is always an eternal one and detached from the normal structures of the world and its concerns.⁶ This is the state of messianic time where this new subject lives in the world and not fully of it, in a state of suspension or detachment from the existing order which does not destroy it.

This new subject exists in the time that remains, in messianic time when one is “not conformed to this world: but [...] transformed by renewing your mind” (Romans, 12:2). Love is labor borne of fidelity; fidelity is loyalty to the event Christ; the event Christ happens to one, in one’s bowels; love does not conform to or transform the world but re-news us, makes a new subject. And if this new subject is to be called Christian, then Saint Paul is undoubtedly the first one.

6 Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, Stanford University Press, 2005.

Ivan Illich: the last Christian

Illich had long dwelt on the meaning of *perversio optimi quae est pessima* (the perversion of the best which is the worst). For him, “the Incarnation makes possible a surprising and entirely new flowering of love and knowledge⁷.” His reading of the Parable of the Samaritan, presented in 1966 at the occasion of a seminar in Cuernavaca and recently published as *Concerning Aesthetic and Religious Experience*, is crucial for understanding the corruption of gratuitous love. The story is well-known, the Samaritan’s action towards the half-dead beaten Jew in the ditch is driven by his bowels (σπλάγχνα). The narrative is a response to the question posed by a Pharisee: “who is my neighbor.” This relationship remains a gift: “your neighbor is he whom you choose to love willingly” (Illich, 2018, p. 84). In Illich’s account, the same stirring that moved Paul to a brotherhood in Christ with Onesimus moves the Samaritan towards the beaten Jew. In his fidelity to the event Christ, in his love of Christ, Illich is contemporaneous with Paul. He is contemporaneous with Paul precisely because and to the extent that he sees modernity as a *perversion* of the event-Christ. In Illich’s account, this most Christian of epochs can also be understood of the corruption of gratuitous love, of vernacular speech, and of the kingdom of God.

As Illich observed, the relationship founded on gratuitous love was also amenable to institutionalization, which began after the Church achieved official status within the Roman Empire. Illich noted that it was customary for a Christian home in the early centuries to keep a spare mattress and some extra bread in case Jesus should visit them in the form of a stranger: “when did we see You a stranger and take You in? ... Truly I say to you as much as you did it to one of the least of these My brothers you have done it to Me” (Matthew 25:38,40). With

7 David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, House of Anansi, 2005, p. 47.

the growth and strengthening of the Roman Catholic Church, Samaritan corporations began to emerge across the Empire. These institutions were charged with taking care of the homeless stranger, of institutionalizing God's action in the world, and thereby transformed the felt relationship of neighborliness into an administrative procedure and ideology⁸.

However, Saint John Chrysostom vehemently opposed the rise of these *xenodocheia*, literally 'house of foreigners'. For him, the Christian household would no longer have a spare mattress or extra bread. Illich concluded that "the attempt to be open to all who are in need results in a degradation of hospitality and its replacement by caregiving institutions" (Cayley, 2005, p. 55).

Illich reaffirms Paul's gesture, remaining faithful to the gratuitous love, to the movement in the bowels, and identifying the perversion of this relationship as a perversion of the Church "that, by institutionalizing itself more and more as an alleged *societas perfecta*, has furnished the modern State with the model for completely taking charge of humanity"⁹. Five centuries after the emergence of Samaritan corporations, only the Church could offer the nourishing milk of salvation. Illich recalls Pope Gregory VII naming "the Church as *Mater*, *Magistra*, and *Domina* – mother, authoritative teacher, sovereign."¹⁰ The institutionalization of the Gospel took many centuries until the constitution of a formal maternal authority that offered an exclusive universal service, namely salvation through baptism.

Illich suggests that the peak of the Church's image as maternal authority can be traced back to Carolingian times. Following the Church reform led by the Scottish monk Alcuin, the court philosopher of Charles the Great, the term 'holy

8 David Cayley, *The Rivers North of the Future*, House of Anansi, 2005, p. 54.

9 Giorgio Agamben, *The Mystery of Evil*, Stanford University Press, 2017, p. 11.

10 Ivan Illich, *Shadow work*, Marion Boyars, 1981, p. 45.

mother the church' ceased to "almost entirely mean the actual assembly of the faithful whose love, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit, engenders new life in the very act of meeting."¹¹ Instead, it meant the sacred mother whose ordained male priests provided pastoral care for the individual family and village. For Illich, this "gender-specific mythology of male hierarchies mediating access to the institutional source of life is without precedent" (Illich 1981 p. 60).

For this pastoral care the sacraments of the liturgy must be performed in Latin, the language of administration and church doctrine. Consequently, *lingua vulgaris* became the term by which to distinguish vernacular speech from Latin, the holy mother tongue. However, peasants were not to be taught Latin, they lived their everyday lives grounded in vernacular speech drawn from their cultural environment. The sacred scriptures were a scarce resource, but the church never dared to insert such sacred language into the mouths of those poor souls. The holy mother tongue was never intended to be universally taught.

Nebrija's *Gramatica Castellana* extended the maternal representation of the church to the Crown. A maternal state must have a mother tongue universally taught. Nebrija petitioned the Queen to control her subjects' speech to bring them under her administrative control. His grammar was a tool for the monopoly over the tongue, for a taught official language to replace vernacular speech. Nebrija was advising the Crown to silence and suppress the abundance of vernacular tongues by transforming the word into a scarce tool that required universal instruction. As Illich observed, "formerly there had been no salvation outside the Church; now, there would be no reading, no writing – if possible, no speaking – outside the educational sphere" (Illich, 1981, p. 44). This new reality disembodied the words on which people existed and

11 Ivan Illich, *Shadow work*, Marion Boyars, 1981, p. 59.

shared. The spoken word then became taught grammar and scarcity dwelt among us.

At this juncture, it becomes clear that, for Illich, the history of the West cannot be separated from the history of the Church and that modernity is the culmination of this long process of perversion of the event Christ. Illich described this modern setting as a castle where a different curtain would move at any moment revealing a new mirror, thus only seeing a reflection of oneself. There were two ways to move within this hall. The first encompassed those who could not find an exit and would simply conform (to the man-made world); the second involved those who would look for a window, expect it or at least did not exclude it (try to get out of the man-made world). To contrast the Christic Way with this modern setting, Illich uses the following image:

There is no window, and the kingdom of God is among us. We must believe in it, and thus, seek it; or we must find it, and then recognize it. Some will achieve this only at the time of their death, as happened with the well-known good thief. But one thing is for sure: there is no window. Instead, there are walls. But one day, the whole castle along with all its walls and its mirrors will loudly come crumbling down.

For Illich, the kingdom of God is always at hand. It is here and now. The Christic way is to be in the world and not of it¹². As he states, “the kingdom comes, and it already is. It is the kingdom of God that comes, and which is already among us (not subjectively speaking “in” each one of us—let alone cosmologically beyond us—but among us)” (Illich, 2018, p. 83).

12 This is precisely the way in which the author of the epistle to Diognetus, written around the year AD 130, describes the manners of the ‘first Christians’: “they dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.”

The kingdom is among us, it is a collective reality, it is holiness as socialization. For Illich and Paul, the Church is the social sense in which the kingdom already exists among us through fraternal and gratuitous love¹³. Onesimus and Philemon are socially embedded in the roles of slave and master (they are in the world), and they also belong to a community of fraternal identification with the love of Jesus Christ (and not of it)¹⁴. For Illich, “the kingdom already exists among us in a social sense, and it consists in the progress of love. Hence, it is profoundly social and personal” (Illich, 2018, p. 85). People of the Way celebrate its presence from the prisons of ancient Rome to the favelas. The West has attempted to improve society, to guarantee its kingdom, and ended up in another room of the same castle. The kingdom of God is not a utopian city, nor will it come at the end of the world. The kingdom of God is neither an ideal to be achieved nor an event to wait for until the parousia, because “where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst” (Mathew 18:20).

In this sense, I can begin to grasp Illich’s aphorism, “the kingdom is fulfilled without utopic completion, and it will come about without being apocalyptic” (Illich, 2018, p. 84). Illich, like Paul, celebrated every breaking of the bread and the shared cup of wine as a reliving of the Last Supper.

13 In *Concerning Aesthetic and Religious Experience*, Illich explicitly addresses faith, the Church, and the kingdom as inseparable realities: “the individual can attain faith only through the Church. Church here relates to a community of believers. Psychologically this seems clear; it is not a community of concepts, images or symbols, but the fraternal identification with the form-of-life of a brother and whose expression is ‘the kingdom.’ And the kingdom is a social reality at a transcendental level. Hence, it cannot be communicated except by means of a communitarian and fraternal form-of-life. Historically, Jesus did so. And today I cannot do this but by means of communion of faith and messianic hope of a fraternal community” (Illich, 2018, p. 87). **N.B.** As also noted by Fabio Milana in his translation of the referred text, the original Spanish uses the term ‘*vivencia*’ which is rendered as ‘form-of-life’ in the English translation. This is, to say the least, anachronistic.

14 The identification with the love of Jesus Christ is a reference to the new commandment he gave unto his disciples, “that ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another” (John 13,34).

They understood that the Christic Way is not about transforming the world nor escaping from it but celebrating it as it is, open to the labor of love towards my neighbor to whom my bowels turn. As Badiou puts it, “far from fleeing from the century, one must live with it, but without letting oneself be shaped, conformed. It is the subject, rather than the century, who, under the injunction of his faith, must be transformed” (Badiou, 2003, p. 110).

Illich once said that he wanted to celebrate his faith for no purpose at all. Illich has rarely spoken openly about faith. In 1966 he said “faith is not the acceptance of a doctrine; it is the commitment to searching, with dedication and risk, the personal, intimate identification with the intimacy of another person. Rabbi Yeshua ben Josef, as the object of this faith, is my brother and friend Jesus, the Lord, the Son of God” (Illich, 2018, p. 87). Afterwards, in the late 1990’s, in conversation with David Cayley, he said:

Faith is a mode of knowledge which does not base itself on either my worldly experience or the resources of my intelligence. It founds certainty on the word of someone whom I trust and makes this knowledge which is based on trust more fundamental than anything I can know by reason. This, of course, is a possibility only when I believe that God’s word can reach me. It makes sense only if the One whom I trust is God.

Could one live by faith in the age of penicillin and retirement pensions? In the age of social and ecological degradation at planetary scale? When the vernacular is systematically destroyed? Could one live by faith in the age of cybernetics when the loss of flesh threatens to extract our bowels? I suggest we read Illich’s books as attempts to flesh out, in different historical contexts, the scaffold that renders it increasingly difficult for the subject of his or her time to contemplate faith,

purposeless faith, faith in the event Christ, nothing else. It is useless to elucubrate if it is harder to find faith at the end of the world than any other historical moment, nevertheless, this is the faith of the last Christian.

The last shall be the first

Both Illich and Paul were men of faith; both were faithful to the event Christ. Paul at the beginning of the messianic time whereas Illich at the end. Both confronted the question of how to pass on the Christic Way, Paul at the beginning of the end and Illich at the edge of it. Both had trusted in the gratuity of love and renounced the power to guarantee this relationship.

Perhaps in the Christic Way every last is also the first. At the edge of the end, the last becomes the first when the face of the other remains a surprise, when the event Christ remains potentially new. To follow the nude Christ may mean to take the narrow path of not conforming to this world but renewing one's gaze, especially in the most Christian epoch. Instead, one should live in the kingdom of God in the world as it is. As Illich wrote on his *Commentary on Robert Fox*, "to speak of faith as the celebration of our seeing what is there: letting God be what and who God is." In the case of Fox this was "mostly 'garbage' as he would find out in the twenty-five years on the streets in New York" (Illich, 2018, p. 170). Perhaps to be the last is to find the kingdom in the smog of over-polluted cities and in the remnants of deforestation and gold mining. Perhaps then the last are indeed the first. For those of faith, the best is always present at the worst.

In the time of the end, which is an eternal day, first and last are not temporal terms. They are no longer terms that mark the beginning and end of a sequence but rather, because outside of linear time, a relationship of proximity. They are not merely a reversal of social status and prestige (prince is pauper and pauper is prince).

Instead, first and last are con-temporaries in the time of the end; they are always already at the same moment because they stand under the sun of the eternal day. The con-temporaneity of Paul and Illich is defined by the fact that for both the kingdom is always at hand. This is perhaps the meaning of the eternal day in the tradition from Paul to Illich. No matter how distant we become from the event, the last becomes the first when we are faithful to it.