

Ivan Illich on the church: from community of spirit to control centre

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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.

The first line of Charles Taylor's foreword to this book reads: "We all owe a debt to David Cayley for bringing to the public this statement of the core thinking of Ivan Illich." Indeed, this is true.

Over the past 20 years or more, David Cayley, well-known radio producer of the even better-known CBC Ideas program, has done Canada a huge service by publishing his scholarly yet intimate interviews with the great 20th century thinkers Northrop Frye, George Grant and Ivan Illich. In this book Cayley returns to his "unfinished" conversation with the provocative and mercurial Ivan Illich, shortly before Illich's death at 72 in 2002.

For readers who weren't yet engaged with the debates on great cultural issues in the late 1960s and during the 1970s, Illich was the most attention-grabbing public speaker and writer on the circuit. He spoke passionately and irreverently about all the social "gods" we held in high reverence. In *DeSchooling Society*, he made the case that schooling had replaced educating, and schooling systematically undermines true education. In *Medical Nemesis* he proposed that hospitals are places people go to get sick. Western society's medicine, he asserted, is far less concerned with healing and far more taken up with professional, technical and research interests for which sick people have become something between guinea pigs and huge inconveniences.

But he wasn't just a critic. He had a very positive vision underlying his table-tipping prophetic claims and he presented it as a desire and effort to reclaim "celebration" and conviviality" as the cultural heart and soul of the good life together. Technology and bureaucracy, in his view, had become enemies of truly human living. Instead of servants, they were landlords, and in getting there they made western peoples sad, alienated and enslaved.

In *The Rivers North of the Future* David Cayley reveals his continuing reverence for this counter-cultural prophet. He focuses on a major but almost unknown thesis in Illich's thinking: Illich's view that the Christian Church, in its own sad change from a community of spirit into a "control" centre, is the true foundation of the totalitarian, secular edifice called the Modern Era. Modernity, though secular in intent and spirit, built itself on church systems and methods.

Illich is not anti-church; he loves the church. He claims the church was born in Spirit and it was called to live in Spirit. However, from Constantine's "use" of Christ's cross as an "instrument" for his military victory in 312 AD through various liturgical and political transformations, the church moved in the direction not of denying spirit but of trying to control it so that its activity and fruits might both be harnessed and assured. The church (clerics) would "control grace," and the people would then be "guaranteed" the salvation, the eternal life, for which they yearned.

Illich used the classical judgment *corruptio optimi pessima est* about this chosen condition of the church over these centuries. "The corruption of the best is the worst." Illich gives us here his view of why that is so, and how it happened.

Cayley's book, like Gaul, is divided into three parts. The first is a careful and caring Introduction in which he traces the development of Illich's life and involvements as backdrop to the development of his ideas and his changing ways of viewing things. The Illich he unfolds for us is always vibrant and exploring. He is also essentially humble, following truth where he finds it reveals itself.

The middle section offers 14 theme reflections by Illich. We are given Illich's spoken word transcribed, in which he takes us on a variety of hugely interesting historical romps through foundational ideas that have come to shape what we call the "modern" world. It is, Illich says, the church's sell-out to "tools" in its centuries of dominance (its canon law, its criminalization of sin, its clerical control of grace, etc.) that provided the foundation at the end of the mediaeval era for the new modern world's own sell-out to tools in the form of machines, bureaucracy, information, etc.

This is tough reading because the ideas are not typical; they really stretch the mind and imagination. Titles such as *The Criminalization of Sin*, *The Gospel and The Gaze*, *On Knowing How to Die: The Last Days of Savonarola* give us his takes on law, disembodiment, and the meaning of living and dying in our culture. They drag the reader from irritation at his vagueness to delight in his fresh discoveries. We find the old made new by this wild man of cultural ideas.

The third section gently returns us to the interview form--Cayley and Illich "in conversation" again, for one last kick together at the mystical and cultural can. Illich tells us of the role of the sacred mouth-to-mouth kiss in early church liturgy, and gives us a view that this *conspiratio*, this "breathing together," this living-by-the-same-air, was as central as the *consummatio* of bread and wine in the early Christian community becoming the real body of Christ. He deplores the corruption of *conspiratio* into *conjuratio* where, by the 12th century (his hinge point for the corruption of spirit into control in the church), living and embodied exchanges are reduced to enfeebling contracts.

The book is well worth the work that Illich's sometimes overly cryptic language requires of us. He is really a genius; a thinker who, like Harry Potter, roars through our social games and cultural conventions on his magic broom, creating both havoc and enlightenment. And he does it all in the light of grace, as a response to a living, embodied "good" far too big for words but never beyond both ordinary and ecstatic relationship. It is this sense in him that Cayley captures so well.

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