

Politics and Religion in the Thought of Ivan Illich

This paper was prepared for a symposium held at the Oakland High School for the Arts under the auspices of California Governor Jerry Brown in the summer of 2013. The occasion was the publication of *Beyond Economics and Ecology*, a collection of Illich's essays on these themes, edited and introduced by Sajay Samuel. The conference was called After the Crisis: The Thought of Ivan Illich Today...

POLITICS AND RELIGION IN THE THOUGHT OF IVAN ILLICH

The heading of today's session is politics and religion, so I'd like to begin by reflecting on these terms, both of which can be extremely slippery. I know they have practical, everyday meanings – we will usually agree in ordinary talk that what goes on in churches and mosques, synagogues and temples is religion, while what is discussed in legislatures and government offices, is politics – but if we inquire a little more deeply, they become quite difficult to distinguish. One of the hallmarks of the modern age was the distinction between a private sphere in which one was free to cultivate one's religion, and a public realm governed by the canons of secular reason. This regime began to take shape at the beginning of the modern age, roughly the 16th century, and it's arguable that before that time there was no such thing as religion in the sense in which the word is used today. Wilfred Cantwell Smith, the great Canadian scholar of religion writing in the 1960's says: "religion as a discrete category of human activity separable from culture, politics and other areas of life is an invention of the modern West." Before the 16th century - at the earliest - the word can denote a virtue, a disposition, a habit – a practice let's say - but not the adoption of a set of propositions or beliefs as "my religion." In fact Cantwell Smith goes on to say that "the rise of the concept of religion is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself." (Just as an aside here some of the slipperiness of the word religion can be seen in that quote, in which Smith, having just said that religion is not a transhistorical essence but a modern invention then goes on to speak of "religion itself" as if it were just such an essence. This shows, I think, the difficulty we still have in speaking of these matters.) By the beginning of the eighteenth century, according to the historian of Christianity John Bossy, the idea of religion is well established. "By 1700," he writes, "the world was full of religions, objective social and moral entities characterized by system, principles and hard edges." And religion once distinguished from politics became in many ways its scapegoat: the

conflicts between the nascent national states of the 16th and 17th centuries, to take just one example, became known as the wars of religion, when they could just as plausibly – more plausibly - have been called the wars of state-making, and taken as illustrating the arbitrary and violent character of state power, rather than the violent and arbitrary character of religious belief.

One could say a lot more about the segregation of the secular from the religious in the modern world, and about the fateful imperial reorganization of other civilizations and cultures along these lines during the colonial era, but the point that I want to make here is that this whole mythology has come undone in our time – undone to the extent that, in some circles at least, one hardly needs to argue the point any more. There are a lot of people to whom it now seems obvious that religion and politics were never really separate – we can see, for example, that millenarian political ideologies like Communism were transpositions of Judaeo-Christian originals, that civilizations are spun out of something more fundamental than either reason or belief, that we enter public and political life as all that we are and not just as disinterested and disembodied units of discourse, that there will always be a sacred – something for which we will sacrifice – because it's in the nature of human beings to produce one. The holy, as William Cavanaugh says, only migrates, never disappears, and, in the modern era, it is as likely to appear in the trappings of the state as of the church - in fact, at the moment, in countries like mine and yours, one can probably more safely abuse religious symbols than desecrate a flag or some other sign of the state.

What this means, in brief, is that when we talk about religion – let's leave politics aside for the moment - we don't always know what we're talking about. The German legal scholar Carl Schmitt says that “all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts.” All right, but even this bold and often quoted statement still imagines two domains between which there is a not quite legitimate intercourse called secularization – the very point that Hans Blumenberg argued with Schmitt in his *Legitimacy of the Modern Age*. The map we have inherited doesn't fit the territory in which we're living, and the apparent resurgence of religion, I think, confirms rather than refutes this diagnosis. With no visible way ahead one tries to go back. But there is no going back. And this is what it means to live, as the title of our gathering has it, after the crisis. There is a crisis, but it is by now so diffuse, so familiar, so total, and so intractable that it makes no sense to call it a crisis in the absence of some way of getting a handle on

it. Modern concepts like religion and politics, private and public, sacred and secular no longer open the door we're trying to open.

This is a situation in which I think Ivan Illich's work can be helpful. This is a subject for a book not a half hour's talk, and I hope to write such a book during the next couple of years, but let me try to just give you a short sketch of why I think he matters. Many thinkers in recent years have developed the idea that I can remember Illich first quoting to me from the historian Christopher Dawson: that the Church is the West and the West is the Church. Jean Luc Nancy, a French philosopher, whom I have been reading recently, says that the nervous system of the West is Christian – an interesting image. It's no longer a surprise to find a contemporary philosopher like Nancy expounding the Epistle of James, as he does in the book I mentioned, or to find Alain Badiou or Giorgio Agamben poring over the letters of the apostle Paul, but these thinkers are, you might say, trying to crack the code of their civilization without ever really declaring themselves in relation to the Gospel. Illich, I think, can tell us more because with him here is still something left to recover once Christianity has been, as Nancy says, deconstructed.

Here again we run into a difficulty with words, and specifically the word Christianity. When I was about to present my last interviews with Illich on CBC Radio in 2000, I got into an argument with my usually indulgent executive producer about the title. I wanted to call it "The Corruption of the Best is the Worst" because that title stuck most closely to the hypothesis Illich wanted to argue. My superior thought the phrase awkward and obscure and insisted that I call the series, The Corruption of Christianity. But, I protested, that implies that there was once some uncorrupted thing called Christianity which then was spoiled, and Illich doesn't believe that. Christianity names the corruption that was inherent in the Christian revelation from the outset – the world being what it is. Christ and anti-Christ enter the world together. I lost the argument and thought it better to present the series under a mystifying title than not to present it at all, but the problem remains. Jacques Ellul got around this difficulty by using the word Christianity for the institutional religion, and an algebraic 'x' for the revelation itself. If you'll allow me I'll just speak of the Gospel as a way of pointing at this 'x'.

Illich claimed that the Gospel was and is something peculiarly volatile or unstable. It's the charter of our freedom to love wherever and whenever we feel called – a possibility that must be revealed since it doesn't lie within humanity's natural repertoire – but it is also the source of a unique evil which is generated whenever this love is made compulsory, and power is exercised in its name. This faith, initially, is not a religion. Illich says so explicitly: “faith in the incarnate word sacrificed on the cross is not a religion and cannot be analyzed with the concepts of religious science.” (Illich in Conversation, p. 268.) But it became a religion: what escapes all bounds was confined and controlled, what can only be a response to a call was delivered on demand. Illich traces out this institutionalization over centuries. It can be summed up as the breaking and dissolution of boundaries. What begins with the Samaritan daring, by God's grace, to reach across the ethnic and ethical divide which separates him from the beaten man in the ditch ends with globalization, the universal circulation of commodities, a morality of relative values, and the fathomless virtuality of life in a here with no beyond.

Christianity, and now I mean Christianity, confronts us today not just as a creed, not just as the sum of its millions of adherents, but as a fully achieved historical Juggernaut. Our way of speaking, our habits of thought and our institutions all emerge from the historical crucible in which, first the church, and then secular governments attempted to make the Gospel perform punctually and reliably. Care is now the primary commodity in which we trade, life the primary idol which we worship.

Illich describes the gradual unfolding of the perverse consequences of the Incarnation as apocalyptic, using this much abused word in its root sense of revelation or unveiling. Over time these consequences accumulate and become visible – visible in a way they were not to the believers who first planted their seeds. To take a simple example – the pioneers of public health insurance in Canada thought of their programme as an obvious desideratum of Christian charity. They did not foresee what Illich called medical nemesis – the way in which the blanket of professional care would eventually suffocate vital abilities and turn life itself into a resource. But we can see it, and this disillusionment is our gift as well as our burden.

Through Illich's eyes, I can see that our religion is our way of life, and not our profession of "belief." In his study of theology, he says, he was always drawn to ecclesiology – the study of the church as an institution – and within ecclesiology to the study of liturgy. Liturgy is the way in which the church manifests itself, the practices of penitence and prayer, praise and procession, eating and drinking by which it comes alive as a social body. Aidan Kavanagh, a historian of liturgy, describes early Christian liturgies that took entire cities as their scale and occupied most of the day on Sunday. There was no congregation meekly seated in rectilinear rows following along in a printed programme – faith was enacted. Theologians say relatively little about the church in the first millennium, Kavanagh says, because they simply take it for granted that "Christian faith could not be lived in any other way than socially, communally and sacramentally."

Today we perform different liturgies. Modern schooling is a liturgy, Illich says, a public service whose ritual repetition produces a social body, and I think we need to take this idea seriously. Our consciousness of who and what we are is produced by what we do. Our religion is defined by our actions not our speculative beliefs. Illich liked the term religiosity because he thought it reached past explicit creeds to capture the atmosphere, the climate of opinion, as one says, in which we live. And our religiosity is generated by our liturgical practices – in schools and hospitals, museums and prisons, hotels and cinemas where we enact what we really believe.

Illich was a proscriptive thinker, as his friend John McKnight said long ago. He engaged in proscription, not prescription. Another way of saying this is to call him an apophatic theologian, one who tells you what God is not, not what God is, but since Illich so emphatically denied being a theologian, I prefer to take him at his word and not call him one. Proscriptive thinker is all right, and the term may even shed some light on the question of how to locate him in relation to the problematic categories of politics and religion. Illich, in his campaigning days, between - let's say - 1960 and 1980, was often understood as a political thinker, and as far as the term goes I think he was. He referred to his own efforts as political campaigns and many of his most celebrated books end with a call for "political counter-measures" against this or that form of institutional overgrowth. But as he went on and began to contemplate the extraordinary inertia of the institutions whose growth he had thought to limit, he finally came face to

face with a conclusion that I think had been gradually dawning on him all along: that modern certainties are so tenacious because their roots go so deep. “Everywhere I look for the roots of modernity,” he says, “I find them in the attempts of the churches to institutionalize, legitimize and manage Christian vocation.”

Our politics, in short, are rooted in our religion, unsatisfactory as both these terms are, and our religion moreover is a derivation of something that in its nature could never be a religion, which makes things even more complicated. This is not to dismiss politics in the instrumental sense of the term, nor to say that nothing is at stake – a great deal is sometimes at stake, and Thomas More’s maxim – If you can’t achieve the best, at least prevent the worst – continues to apply. But it is to say that if politics as a discussion about what is good, a discussion in which all options have not been foreclosed by economic and technological forces that have long since escaped our control – if politics in that sense is ever to resume, we will first have to understand the liturgies, the rituals, the rainedances, as Illich liked to say, by which we produce and reproduce the world that surrounds us. We will have to learn to swim against the current and seek in our tradition what British theologian John Milbank calls “the future we have missed.”

It seems to me that the time is propitious for such a reconsideration. Religion persists – against the prediction of universal secularization that was one of sociology’s founding certitudes until not so very long ago – but it doesn’t necessarily persist as “religion” in the modern sense – that is as private, incommunicable, and antagonistic belief. As modern definitions weaken, we can begin to see that religion is not a private property but a human propensity, and, as such, can be thought of as a commons rather than a private enclosure. In the face of the recognition that “the crisis”, as I said earlier, has ended only by becoming total, I think we have entered a clearing, an opening where it may become possible to think differently about our tradition.

So let me conclude with another story about the same colleague and friend I spoke of earlier – my old executive producer whose indulgent and understanding supervision of my work was one of the great blessings of my life, even though I may appear to be picking on him here. Sometime in the late 1990’s I presented him with a plan for four series of broadcast all dealing, I think I said, with contemporary appropriations of Christianity – the four subjects were to be Simone Weil, René Girard, Ivan Illich, and Herman Bianchi, a Dutch jurist, less well known than the other three, who was then trying to reintroduce the theory and practice of sanctuary into criminal justice. My friend approved my plan, but then

expressed a hope that afterwards I would return to more political and social subjects. I understood at that moment that I did not feel as my colleague seemed to that these “religious” subjects were somehow set aside from social and political concern as if they pertained to some other world than this one. So I said that I thought that “religion” was precisely what needed to be brought to light in the public square, and that nothing could be more political than curious, disinterested inquiry into the religious roots of contemporary predicaments. I’m not sure I convinced him, but I continue to think that’s true.