

A Competition of Corruptions: Mediterranean Disembedding versus Asian Nihilism

by Carl Mitcham

Corruptio optimi quae est pessima. This Latin mantra of Ivan Illich's last years may well apply to my own effort here. In trying to do my best, in homage to his life and thought, to understand and consider some implications of Illich's work, I may well be corrupting it — not to mention my own thinking. Since this is a possibility I take seriously, for any untoward results, I wish in advance to offer apologies.

My effort is to think about Ivan Illich and Buddhism. I want to let myself be stimulated by my friendship with Ivan — an experience that many of us have had, of being deeply befriended by someone we did not fully understand, whose ideas strongly influenced us, although often leading in directions he would not have endorsed. Yet his intellectual and somatic friendship — I still vividly recollect his *abrazo* and penetrating gaze, the sharing of meals and wine or tea, and conversation around a candle — challenges me to think in ways that become struggles in the search for words, insight, and fitting arguments. It is an effort to return to the memory of that friendship, to let myself imaginatively sense again his presence, assisted by others who were his friends in greater proportions than I was graced to be, and from within this palace of memory to think about a relationship that Ivan and I never discussed, except in the most allusive terms: Christianity and Buddhism. Because this is not an issue that was ever explicitly pursued, it is thus an effort to think after Illich, to see if there is something I can recover from him for my own life in a world he no longer inhabits with his long nose and lanky body, bringing forth from his absence some guiding in-

timations that might still be claimed to reflect his presence. As I understand him, Illich was deeply rooted in Mediterranean Christianity.

Because of this he struggled to understand the paradoxes and contradictions with which the Christian tradition has become entangled, and developed his interpretation *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* in order to live with such entanglements. Yet, ever since the outbreak of Islamic-based terrorism — although this is an ideological term from which I wish to keep by my distance — I have increasingly struggled with Illich's interpretation. My struggle has, in turn, led me to take refuge in Buddhism, a move Illich would undoubtedly have questioned. I would nevertheless like to share, in what remains an inchoate form, this turn from Christianity to Buddhism as an alternative to Illich's interpretative strategy. At the same time, I welcome criticism from the community of Illich's friends.

Illich's History of the Christian Fall

Let me begin with a summary statement of Illich's interpretation of Christian history. Allow me to do so by quoting from Charles Taylor's expanded Gifford Lectures of 1999, published as *A Secular Age* (2007), in one of the final chapters of which he invokes Illich's analysis. According to Taylor,

Scholars agree that the Christian church which arose in the ancient world was a new kind of religious association, that it created around itself new "service" institutions, like hospitals and hospices for the needy. It was heavily engaged in the practical works of charity. This kind of activity remained important throughout the long centuries of Christendom, until in the modern era, these institutions have been taken over by secular bodies, often by governments. Seen within the history of Western civilization,

the present-day welfare state can be understood as the long-term heir to the early Christian church.

As a summary expression for this institutional takeover of what had been initially the activities of persons — activities given paradigmatic form by the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) — both Illich and Taylor have used the term “disembedding.” As a technical term, this word can be traced back to studies in the history and sociology of economics by Karl Polanyi¹ (1944) of how markets in the 16th and 17th centuries were disinterred from the societies or cultures in which they traditionally inhaled. Prior to this period, for instance, monetary transactions were hedged by numerous mores and counter mores institutions; buying and selling were generally subordinate to sharing and the cultivation of family, kinship, and ethnic ties. The creation of markets in which atomistic individuals interacted primarily based on self-interest was, for Polanyi, a wrenching development — one that Illich saw as foreshadowed by the Samaritan who befriends someone outside his own *ethnos*.

But before markets narrowed personal relationships into the pursuit of individual material self-interest, social institutions such as hospitals had been established to lighten, for Christians, the burden of extending to strangers the practices of corporeal and spiritual works of mercy previously thought appropriate only within embedded family or ethnic relationships. This too was a disembedding movement, although of a slightly different sort. Christians had been called upon to have compassion for those in need, but the acts of binding up wounds, pouring on oil and wine, and taking strangers in their own arms, were progressively attenuated in favor of paying for care and lodging at an inn. In the name of extending embedded relationships, which are certainly more onerous than disembedded ones, the burden of the extension

1 Polanyi, Karl. (1944) *The Great Transformation*. New York: Rinehart.

was lightened by means of a division of labor that serves as another aspect of disembedding — an aspect that the economist Adam Smith saw as a foundation of increased economic productivity. To multiply this good, the good was itself transformed and — in Illich's eyes — corrupted.

This pursuit of disburdenment in Christian history is a trajectory that Albert Borgmann² — to whom Taylor has also referred — finds manifest in modern technology as well. Going beyond division of labor in the factory, the design of mass-produced consumer goods has pursued what Borgmann calls the paradigm of the device — a product provides commodities freed of the demands of work and labor on the part of users. Just as the hospital disburdens the Christian from the personal work of caring for the stranger, so the central heating system disburdens the householder from cutting wood and tending the hearth to warm the home.

For Illich, however, disembedding and disburdenment also reference a physical experience, and are intimately associated with “disembodying.” In our increasingly technoscientific world — as has, for instance, been analyzed especially by Illich and his colleague Barbara Duden³ — the foundations of our sensory experience are increasingly replaced by scientifically instrumented knowledge and artifact-enabled behavior, both of which have their own roots in Christian history. The disinterring of these multiple roots involves a complex historical archeology that it is not necessary to review in detail here, when simply trying to appreciate one conclusion — namely, the creation of a system of services for the sick, poor, and needy which leads, Illich ultimately argues, to the experiencing of ourselves in system terms.

2 Borgmann, Albert. (1984) *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

3 Duden, Barbara. (1993) *Disembodying Women: Perspectives on Pregnancy and the Unborn*. Trans. Lee Hoinacki. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

“Now,” Taylor continues, “most people, whether Christian or not, would see this as a positive credit to Christianity, as a ‘progressive’ move in history for which the Church is responsible.” In other words, most people would endorse as good all of the following: the institutionalization of charity in hospitals and international non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross/Crescent; advances in scientific knowledge about such abstract phenomena as global climate change (what is experienced is not climate but weather); developments of technological disembedding and disburdenment in agriculture, transportation, and communication; and transformations of embodiment in medicine — including the theory and practical utilization of statistics and probability in all sorts of healthcare decision making systems from epidemiological policy formulation to therapeutic diagnosis. “Without necessarily denying that good has come from this,” writes Taylor, “Illich sees also [the] dark side [of such achievements]. In particular, he sees the way [they have] worked out a profound betrayal of the Christian message.” (p. 737)

Indeed, Illich has himself summarized his interpretation of this betrayal as follows:

[O]ne of the ways of understanding the history of Western Christianity is as a progressive loss of the sense that the freedom for which Christ is our model and our witness is folly. The Western Church, in its earnest effort to institutionalize this freedom, has tended to transform supreme folly first into desirable duty, and then into legislated duty. It is folly to be hospitable in the way the Samaritan is — pure folly if you really think it through. To make of this a duty and then create categories of people towards whom this duty is owing witnesses to a brutal form of earnestness. More than that, this inversion of the extraordinary folly that became possible through the Gospel represents a mystery of evil (Cayley, 2005, p. 58)

The corruption of the best is the worst. Illich's experience of what he refers to as the monstrosity or horror of the modern substitution of institutional action for the possibility of a human relationship that breaks the bonds of social order — as exemplified in Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan — was itself made possible by Christianity and even promoted by certain well-intentioned actions on the part of the Christian Church, especially the Christian Church of the Latin-speaking West. According to Illich, there is a dependency of modernity on Christianity, the best or highest or most perfect revelation or faith, that can itself best be described as its corruption.

Felix Culpa

This theory that the corruption of the best is the worst is, in the history of Christian theology, counterbalanced by a notion that corruption can lead to or be a necessary preparation for the better. In the words pronounced with the kindling of the Pascal candle during the Easter Vigil: *O certe necessarium Adae peccatum, quod Christi morte deletum est! O felix culpa, quae talem ac tantum meruit habere Redemptorem!* “O truly necessary sin of Adam, that was blotted out by the death of Christ! O happy fault, that merited so great a Redeemer!” What is apparently absent in Illich's interpretation of the Fall of Christian history is any sense that this might be a happy fall or fault, one necessary for or preparatory to a greater revelation or reality.

With this reference and suggestion, however, let me immediately confess to a deep uneasiness. I cannot help but fear that by placing such a perspective in play, I may be making things worse — *Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa*. Is it not, for instance, a variant of the theology of *felix culpa* that Illich himself criticized with his scornful rejection in the 1970s of Left wing “apocalyptic randomness” — and on which now rest the confident enthusiasms, if not perverse hopes,

of some fundamentalist evangelicals toward the possibility of nuclear conflagration in the Middle East? Yet even aware as I am of the limitations of my own understanding in this regard, might it not be that Illich himself would encourage me to continue — to try to articulate my uneasy double-bind about where he leaves his interpretation and where it might still be taken? In this ambivalent conflict of intentions, let me venture the following three hypothetical commentaries.

First, suggesting that the notion of *felix culpa* is absent from Illich is not wholly accurate. In his discussion with David Cayley of the *mysterium iniquitatis*, Illich describes the unprecedented “horror, cruelty, and degradation” that he experiences as present in modernity understood as a perversion of revelation. Then, admitting that he stammers, Illich says that seeing modernity as a new and mysterious kind of evil induces the “temptation — I can’t avoid saying it, I cannot go on without saying it — of cursing God’s Incarnation.”⁴ In a footnote, Cayley seeks to clarify this admission by noting how God’s omniscience requires foreknowledge of the perverse consequences of Revelation. He further quotes an off-the-record remark by Illich from another occasion: “The Absurdistan, or hell-on-earth, in which we live is something Jesus must have foreseen, and it must therefore have been his intention in his founding of the Church.” Thus, according to Cayley, “Illich speaks here of ‘an intense temptation’ to ‘curse God’s Incarnation’ not in order to threaten blasphemy but in order to dramatize the unique, mysterious, world-devouring character of the evil he is trying to describe” (p. 239). Given God’s supreme goodness, Cayley might also have observed, God must intend good through such consequences. (The thought here is complicated by Illich’s preferred term, “Incarnation” over “Revelation,” since the paradox of Incarnation promoting dis-

4 Cayley, David. (2005) *The Rivers North of the Future: The Testament of Ivan Illich*. Toronto: Anansi, p.61

embodiment requires an extended historical analysis.) There is therefore a hint that this evil, this corruption of the Gospel, could, in God's providence, be prefatory to a greater good. Yet this is not a possibility that Illich himself explores. Instead, he turns again to attempt to characterize the corruption itself and its sources.

Illich's argument regarding how the *corruptio optimi pessima* principle operates with regard to the Christian doctrine of the contingency of creation provides a good illustration of his argument. According to Illich, the teaching regarding the coming into being of the world *creatio ex nihilo* was progressively deepened into a doctrine of the complete dependency of created nature on a supernatural God. The integration of this doctrine into the body of European culture took place over centuries in what might be described as the mental digestive reflections of a diversity of thinkers from Philo of Alexandria and Augustine of Hippo to Ibn Sina and Thomas Aquinas, all operating under Jewish, Christian, and Islamic influences. This history of more than ideas brought something new into existence: not just at the intellectual but at a subconscious, sensual, feeling level of the world as through and through contingent, with no reality or being of its own, as the gift of an all-powerful God. But the dependency on God is a fragile one. When God is initially made more and more remote in the early years of modernity, and then finally knocked away entirely by the Enlightenment, it is not possible to return to the self-sufficient nature and cosmos of the Greeks. Instead, humans are left with a nature or creation that is no longer a creation and thus a mere something or stuff to be freely manipulated, violently exploited, blown up, and controlled.

But why is it not possible to return to the pre-Christian cosmos that exists on its own in self-sufficient and self-subsistent splendor? Why is it not possible simply to inquire, con-

cerning the doctrine of the Incarnation, whether this was the true or best interpretation of an experience of the divine that was for many years and for many people during the first centuries of the Christian era a deeply ambiguous and indeterminate revelation? Illich himself calls our attention to the rich conflict of interpretations during this period, and on occasion seeks to resurrect interpretations and doctrines that have been marginalized by Christian history. Is it not reasonable and possible to reconsider some of the non-marginalized doctrines? Are we no more than the victims of a historically determined interpretation of the development of Christian doctrine?

Second, equally prominent in what Illich calls the monstrosity and horror of institutionalization and disembedding sponsored by Christianity is violence. The evil about which Illich wants to awaken us is subtle, one that perverts obvious goods so that they become evils of less than obvious character. But in the scholarly world the subtle sometimes crowds out the obvious. Much more obvious are the evils of the terrorist actions of the Islamicist airplane hijackers of September 11, 2001, and the repetitive suicide bombings of their own co-religionists, actions that disclose what I now interpret as an endemic orientation toward violence — not just in Islam but across a host of Jewish and Christian traditions and institutions as well.

There were no doubt adequate reasons to reach this conclusion before 9/11. Take the chronicles of the conquest of Canaan and the cursing psalms from the Hebrew Scriptures; recall the Crusades and the virulence of anti-Semitism from St. John Chrysostom through Martin Luther; and consider the Muslim faith-fueled wars against Hindu and Buddhist cultures as manifested, for example, in the Mogul empire of the 16th century. But the events of 9/11 shocked me into recognizing what I had previously been able to ignore or hide from myself. Efforts that I made in the 1970s, as a member of

a lay religious community inspired by the *Regula* of St. Benedict, to interpret the cursing psalms in metaphorical terms, now strike me as artificial in the extreme. The arrogant righteousness of Psalm 69, which is quoted on eight occasions in the Greek Scriptures, calls on God to “blot [one’s enemies] from the book of the living”; when Psalm 137, the last line of which is quoted three times in the New Testament, proclaims that “Happy is he who takes your children and dashes them against the rock,” this is much more than an allegory for the struggle of the righteous with their own sinful natures.

Certainly, there are propensities to violence inherent to human nature, propensities well manifested outside the Judeo-Christian-Islamic ambience — from Alexander the Great through Genghis Khan to Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Zedong. But Buddhism, for instance and especially, has challenged such tendencies and argued their fundamental immorality, not just with regard to humans but in relation to all sentient beings, more than any of the religions of the book. The three Abrahamic religions more often seem to cultivate rationalizations for the conquest and killing of humans and non-humans alike. In addition, it is not clear that the righteous reaction to the industrialized slaughter that characterized 20th century weapons development programs and political practice has been an effective way to address these new forms of institutionalized violence. The claim by some peoples that God has abandoned them to a slaughter only highlights beliefs that God has given them special roles in history, roles that have repeatedly justified their own righteous violence. The pious justifications for massive killing in the manifestos of Al Qaida leader Osama Bin Laden are echoed by the declarations of unrepentant sovereignty in the cocky swagger of President George W. Bush.

Such a provocation can serve as a transition to my third commentary in the hypothetical mode (to adopt a notion of which Illich himself is fond — the idea of exploring

a hypothesis). I cannot help but sense something of the contrived or artificial in some of Illich's rhetoric regarding modernity. Again, I present this hypothesis with some trepidation. Certainly, I do not in the least doubt the sincerity of Illich's struggle with his heritage of Mediterranean Christianity and what he calls its transmogrification during his lifetime. But in Illich's characterizations of the corruptions of Christianity as "monstrosity" and "horror" I find intimations of a rhetorical imposition, not to say violence, with which I am less than comfortable. Is it really honest or appropriate to utilize such words, most commonly applied to Stephen King and slasher movies, when trying to describe a trajectory of spiritual decay or unintentional reversal?

Grant for the sake of argument the reality of the experiential or phenomenological evil of institutionalization, disembedding, and disembodiment about which Illich seeks to enlighten. In truth, I think of myself as largely sharing Illich's critical assessment of the disembedding, technoscientific world in which we are now forced to live, even while I am ill at ease with some of the rhetorical formulations he adopts. But does this corruption not call for more than jeremiad—that is, for some analytic characterization of the different modes it can take? Are there not natural forms of decay as exhibited by living organisms in the process of returning to the dust from which they came that deserve to be distinguished, for instance, from the behavioral decadence arising from failures to abide by moral laws? Natural decay can serve to remind us of a former beauty and its fragility, can highlight the splendor of a passing achievement, whereas cultural decadence may serve as a moral lesson or cautionary warning. Surely there is more than one possible response to a *corruptio optimi*.

Consider the following possible reflective counterpoint to that of Illich. Illich appears to present it as a kind of confirmation of the higher truth of a Christian doctrine such as that

of the Incarnation or of the theology of radical contingency that their corruptions have led to such disastrous results. Then rejecting the results, he seems to feel trapped between the doctrines and their consequences. But why not turn the argument around and allow the corruption to sponsor a questioning of the originating doctrine and theology? Is there no alternative to blasphemy or the principle of *felix culpa*?

A Questioning Response

The corruption of the best is the worst. For Plato and the Greeks this was a *reductio ad absurdum* criticism of the pursuit of what might look like perfection. The “perfection” of the *polis*, for instance, in Plato’s *Politeia*, which is the perfection of the individual human writ large, is presented as something brought about by immoderate desire. The corrupt city, one in need of purgation by the philosopher king, grows precisely from a rejection of the human condition as no better than a city for pigs. The Christian tradition appears both attracted to and repulsed by the replacement for what might well be called the “divine city,” that is, the city of high affluence which, because of its associated diseases, must therefore be subjected to a therapy of desire. Yet is not Socrates’ dialectic engagement with Glaucon and Adiemantus a fundamental criticism of utopianism and its evils, evils that include the leading of all adults “into the fields”, and a forced rule by philosophers — actions that find echoes in what James C. Scott (1998) calls high modernist social engineering?⁵ At the end of the dialogue, would Socrates reject as impossible a return to the healthy city that he had been forced to abandon by the mis-perceptions of his interlocutors?

Take another instance of the *corruptio* principle, Lord Acton’s famous statement that “Power tends to corrupt, and

5 Scott, James C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Taylor, Charles. (2007) *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Is such a *corruptio* not regularly and reasonably understood to imply and entail the rejection of absolute power, its needful delimitation? Is this not precisely the conclusion argued for by Jacques Ellul), a colleague to whom Illich once paid homage, when he proposed in the face of the increasing powers of modern technology an “ethics of nonpower” — a voluntary detachment from and abandonment of the temptations that are part and parcel of our corrupted experience?⁶

Indeed, I would dare to suggest that there is a paradox if not a contradiction in Illich’s interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. His interpretation points toward, if it does not presume, a freedom of the will empowered with the ability to constitute by its action a new reality or relationship — a presumption that borders on a philosophical decisionism (*Dezisionismus*). At one and the same time, Illich appears to claim that Christians have brought by their formative actions something utterly new into existence, and that it is not possible for them to reform or turn away from this new existence when it turns out to be an unintended evil.

Why should the same decisionism that made possible the evil not make equally possible its rejection? The anti-theological decisionism of Friedrich Nietzsche, for instance, is transcended by a doctrine of the eternal return of the same. Is there no theological equivalent apart from the principle of *felix culpa*?

Toward a Buddhist Alternative

Yet surely there is a profound realism in what has, on another occasion, been described as Illich’s stance of elegiac lament. Indeed, Illich has described himself as needing to “accept powerlessness, mourn that which is gone, renounce

6 Ellul, Jacques. (1980) “The Ethics of Nonpower.” Trans. Nada K. Levy. In Melvin Kranzberg, ed., *Ethics in an Age of Persuasive Technology* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), pp. 204-212.

the irrecoverable” (Illich, 1992, p. 4). The course of Illich’s life, his “biology” in the literal sense, can thus be characterized in terms of a great arc from radical social criticism in the days of *Deschooling Society* (1971) to a meditation on the dark night of history. From Illich’s perspective, then, would not any attempt, stimulated by the fire of 9/11, to trace out an arc from Christianity to Buddhism, not be profoundly naive, unrealistically romantic, even laughable at my age? Is it not presumptuous to think that one can walk away from my Atlantic version of a Mediterranean Christian heritage? In addition, is not Buddhism itself just as fatally flawed by its own *corruptio optimi pessima* in the forms of passive nihilism, resignation, and contamination by the Buddhist samurai culture of Japan?

In response it is perhaps permissible to speak somewhat personally, even existentially. Insofar as I put forth the hypothesis of something contrived or artificial in some of Illich’s rhetoric regarding modernity, it is because of my own struggle with contrivance and artificiality. From my early years I contrived to see myself as a Christian, all the while sensing something artificial in my self-description. My sense of inauthenticity was always more of artifice than sense.

One reason I was uncomfortable in this regard was that I could never say with honesty that I had a personal relationship with Jesus. I came of age in the suburban Methodism of Dallas, Texas, but never experienced the inspirational faith of my evangelical peers. In a conversation with my pastor that I can still recall, I once tried to discuss reading Bertrand Russell’s *Why I Am Not a Christian* (1957), only to have the minister respond: “You should not be reading that kind of book. If you are reading that book, your soul is already in danger.”

A few years later I discovered Evelyn Underhill’s distinction between Christocentric and theocentric religious experience, which seemed to provide a way to be Christian

without a personal relationship to Jesus.⁷ Describing my spirituality as theocentric rather than Christocentric provided a way to place myself in the larger tradition of Catholicism which I was then attempting to practice. Yet even in this, there was a sense of doubt, of uneasiness, of forced self-definition that never quite took hold. Sometimes I felt like I was remaining Christian out of fear: fear of the possibility that I would be damned if I did not accept God's gift.

One repeated image that can be found in the works of C.S. Lewis is of people placing themselves in hell by rejecting the suggestions of transcendence found in the presence of longing and desire.⁸ One night, the dead Cistercian monk and writer, Thomas Merton, with whom I had once corresponded, appeared to me in a dream and said, "Your doubts only take you more deeply into Christ." But in the morning, it felt more like an illusion — indeed, a dream. So I confess to always being unclear about what to make of Illich's own clear commitment to both Jesus of Nazareth and the Catholic church, even during my life as a non-practicing Catholic, during which time I often sought to take his faith as model or inspiration for an alternative something that might somehow become my own.

Now, stimulated precisely by Illich's interpretation *corruptio optima pessima*, the non-theism of the way of the Buddha and the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, appears as a more authentic commitment, in part because of its ahistoricist character. Taylor's analysis of the secular age as determined by the historical presence of conditions of choice with regard to faith is an analysis that complements Illich's, but again seems to pose the same paradox: Why should such conditions of choice not open up wider possibilities than those between different types of Christianity or between Christian-

7 Underhill, Evelyn. (1925) *The Mystics of the Church*. London: Clark.

8 Lewis, C.S. (1943) *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism*. 3rd edition. London: Geoffrey Bles.

ity and some rejection of religion?

Could it not be true that life is suffering, that suffering is caused by craving, that suffering can end, and that there is a path which can lead to the end of suffering? Additionally, does not the Buddhist teaching of dependency between mind and experience allow us to think of bringing alternative ways of life into existence — ways of life that have historical reality but are not thereby determinative of such reality? In the words of the opening verses of the *Dhammapada*:

Mind is the forerunner of all states,
which are in turn mind-made.
If one speaks or acts with clouded mind,
suffering follows,
just as the cartwheel follows the hoof of the ox that pulls it.

Mind is the forerunner of all states,
which are in turn mind-made.
If one speaks or acts with pure mind,
contentment follows,
just like a never separating shadow.

Consider, however, the *corruptio* of such a teaching: On the one side, is it not, as the French historian of religion L. De la Vallée Poussin maintained, a spiritual nihilism that negates the world of appearance and existence?⁹ Has such nihilism not been further contaminated by its use in the justification of Japanese militarism during the 20th century? On the other, is such a Buddhist *corruptio* not to be preferred to that derived from the corruption of Christianity which, according to Illich, yields a world so committed to appearance and existence that it attempts to take control

9 Vallée-Poussin, Louis de la. (1917) "Nihilism (Buddhist)." In James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* (New York: Scribner's), vol. 9, pp. 372-373.

and dominate through systematic disembedding and modern technology? In comparison, is the Buddhist *corruptio* — and therefore Buddhism — not to be preferred?

At the same time there remains something naive about such an argument. There is no doubt that we who are heirs, even when we do not wish to be, of a distinctly Mediterranean corruption cannot easily and simply walk away. Yet is there no nobility in the attempt? To think instead that such an attempt is simply that of the fool, would this not be somehow ignoble — a *corruptio pessimi* or corruption, if such were possible, even of the worst?

The argument from comparative corruption might then be stated thus: The corruption of Christianity can lead to a greater evil than the corruption of Buddhism. On the one side, this can be interpreted as an argument for the greatness of Christianity, *corruptio optimi pessima*. On the other, insofar as the corruption of Buddhism leads to lesser evils, can one not also propose it as better, more fitting, for that ambivalent condition in which humans find themselves? Such is the paradoxical hypothesis to which my wandering reflection on Illich's hypothesis *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* has brought me. Again, for the corruption that it well may be, I apologize and invite your correction.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Jim Grote for reading and criticizing an earlier version of this argument, to Jean Robert for never ending stimulation of reflection, and to Roberto Ochoa for an invitation that encouraged writing.