

On walking away from Christianity:  
a reply to Carl Mitcham

by David Cayley

*In the juvenescence of the year  
Came Christ the tiger... Us he devours...  
After such knowledge, what forgiveness?  
-T.S. Eliot, Gerontion*

In the Spring 2023 issue of *Conspiratio*, Carl Mitcham presents a heartfelt account of his long wrestle with the ideas of Ivan Illich, and of his ultimate decision to “walk away” from his never quite fulfilled quest for Christian inspiration in favour of Buddhism. His essay raises a number of resonant and far-reaching questions about Illich’s teaching, and, since Mitcham expressly asks for a response, as well as giving considerable evidence of uncertainty and hesitation in the way he advances his argument with the master –he begins with an apology and asks humbly at the end for “correction”– I would like to take up some of the points he has raised. My attempt at an answer will be far from the *correction* Mitcham invites but will, I hope, introduce some considerations that may make Illich better understood.

Mitcham’s criticisms centre on the Latin adage that Illich claimed summed up the culture of Latin Christendom and the world-wide modernity that was its sequel: *corruptio optimi pessima*, the corruption of the best is the worst. Illich’s idea, in brief, is that the revelation of God in the person of Jesus Christ is the highest and greatest truth we can know, but that this truth is also uniquely volatile –and liable, when transformed into a source of power, to produce an evil which is bad to the same degree as the good it parodies and corrupts.

David Cayley, dccayley@gmail.com  
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Mitcham, as I understand him, puts forward four main arguments. The first is that Illich presents his *corruptio* principle too starkly, as if it were a kind of trap from which there is no exit, thus leaving Mitcham as his reader in an “uneasy double bind” from which there is neither any way back nor any way forward. The second is that Illich uses a highly charged rhetoric – “monstrosity and horror” are the terms Mitcham takes as examples– which tends to overemphasize the violence involved in the institutionalization of the Gospel and to downplay or overshadow the “endemic orientation toward violence” of all the Abrahamic religions –a violence that Mitcham thinks is inherent in the “Mosaic distinction” by which the Israelites first learned to discriminate their *true faith* in the *one God* from all other beliefs and which then licenced and legitimated their conquest of Canaan and their extermination of the peoples then living in that Promised Land.<sup>1</sup> The third argument is that decay, decline and decadence –corruption– are natural processes inherent in all human undertakings and not in any way unique to Christianity. And, fourth and finally, Mitcham sees an embryonic “decisionism” in Illich’s reading of the parable of the Samaritan in which the Samaritan exhibits, Mitcham says, “a freedom of the will empowered with the ability to constitute by its action a new reality or relationship.”

Underlying these four explicit assertions is an idea that never becomes fully articulate but which I hope I can express, without doing too much violence to the subtlety and reticence of Mitcham’s argument, as follows: Mitcham is asking, I think, what if the problem is not so much the corruption of Christianity as Christianity itself? If corruption is inherent in all things and, consequently, inevitable, why cultivate a faith that will unavoidably degenerate into a unique and overmaster-

1 The idea of “the Mosaic distinction” is drawn from Jan Assmann’s *Moses the Egyptian* (Harvard, 1998). The conquest of the Promised Land, the land God gave to Abraham (Genesis, 12:7), is described in the biblical books of Joshua and Judges.

ing evil? Why not rather adopt an alternative like Buddhism, which may degenerate into nihilism when corrupted, but at least will not produce the horror and monstrosity before which Illich throws up his hands?

These questions take us deep into the heart of Illich's work. The first point I want to make is that Illich was himself an extremely reticent writer who generally said less than he knew. Back in his CIDOC days, he remarked to his friend John McKnight that he wanted to confine himself to *proscription* rather than *prescription*, never "tell[ing] people what they ought to do," and this remained a maxim throughout his life.<sup>2</sup> Had it not been for my persistence in asking him to expound the idea of *corruptio optimi pessima*, he might well never have done so. He had broached the idea a couple of times –for example in his "Hospitality and Pain," a sermon (his word) preached in Chicago in 1987– but never developed it in the extensive way that he did in my radio series, "The Corruption of Christianity" and its sequel *The Rivers North of the Future*; and it seems quite possible that these ideas would have remained unexpressed had I not crossed his path. This is not the normal procedure of a scholar eager to explicate his ideas. It is the undertaking of someone who lives according to what he discerns, from moment to moment, as the will of God. I find it utterly remarkable, and endlessly evocative, that a text which has so thoroughly shaped my understanding, as well as occupied my time, should be *contingent* in this way. Such spontaneity not only hints at a world breathtakingly different from the planned catastrophe in which we actually live, it also suggests that the fog of sin may be a lot thicker than we usually think. But the more immediate point I want to draw out of this instance is that Illich worked so much in this responsive mode that he can hardly be said to have had a doctrine at all.

2 "Part Moon, Part Travelling Salesman: Conversations with Ivan Illich," *Ideas*, CBC Radio, p. 31. The transcript is here: <https://www.davidcayley.com/transcripts>

This is explicit at various points in *The Rivers North of the Future*. It begins with Illich's adamant and repeated insistence that he is "no theologian" and that "no one can tell me that I am."<sup>3</sup> He has often been disregarded on this point and treated as if he were what he says he is not, but I take him seriously. Moreover, I think he is renouncing more than just the "institutionally and juridically determined function" that is implied by the name of theologian in the Roman Catholic Church. I think he is, in a certain sense, bracketing theology altogether. Speaking of the early Christians' confidence that they could foresee and anticipate the end of things – "their happy trust that the light in the East would come tomorrow, and if not tomorrow, the day after tomorrow" – he says, "... what a privilege to live in a time that has lost its this-worldly calendar and watch-related scaffolding. We live in an age of scaffoldless hope." This is a radical account of contemporary disorientation and of our inability to name the time in which we live or to relate it to the history with which it seems in so many ways discontinuous. In this *aporia*, this dark silence, this interruption, which is a blessing – a privilege – only if we can learn to inhabit it without grasping for premature consolations, theology loses its power to make authoritative statements. In the same spirit, in *The Rivers North of the Future*, he refers modestly to his claim that modernity is perverted Christianity as no more than a "research hypothesis."<sup>4</sup> He calls it this, he says, because he wants his proposal to be understood not as a thesis, a definite proposition, but as what Marshall McLuhan liked to call a "probe," a way of seeing, a way of bringing things to light.<sup>5</sup> He also says that the "research themes" he is putting into consideration will require

3 *The Rivers North of the Future*, House of Anansi, 2005, p. 121

4 *Rivers*, p. 68

5 *Rivers*, p. 191

a great deal of further study, claiming with regard to one of these themes –“the lines of evolution that link...the medieval Church to the emergence of the modern state”– that he “would need six or seven colleagues, each following one of these lines, and reporting back in two years, to do this subject justice.”<sup>6</sup> All this suggests a highly tentative approach, the approach of a man who, for all his eloquence and erudition, is still feeling his way.

Turning now to Mitcham’s specific criticisms, let me first take up the idea that Illich focuses too relentlessly on the shadow side of the Incarnation. Developing the idea of *felix culpa*, the happy Fall, whereby the loss of Eden is seen as the necessary preface to our salvation –“Nor had one apple taken been...Then had never Our Lady A-been heaven’s queen,” as an old song says<sup>7</sup>– Mitcham asks why Illich pays so little attention to the idea that “the corruption of the Gospel could, in God’s providence, be prefatory to a greater good,” concentrating instead on the corruption itself. Here let me quote Illich himself from a passage concerning the mystery of evil, or *mysterium iniquitatis*, the phrase by which Jerome’s Latin Bible, the Vulgate, rendered the apostle Paul’s claim in his Second Letter to the Thessalonians that with the appearance of the Christ, a “mystery of lawlessness” had also been introduced into the world and was already “at work.”<sup>8</sup>

...Only faith can fully discern the mystery of evil. But I know that there are many who have experienced the horror of our time as something that they can’t explain away,

6 *Rivers*, p. 191

7 “Adam Lay Ybounden,” a Middle English song text from the 15<sup>th</sup> century which has been given many modern choral settings.

8 The Second Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians, 2:7; the Greek word in this verse, which Jerome rendered as *iniquitatis*, and the Revised Standard Version translates as lawlessness, is *anomos*. Some scholars dispute Paul’s authorship of this letter but that is beside our point here.

and that it would be cowardice to relegate to some locked corner of their heart. Those who are willing to face the horror as something unexplainable act as witness for a mystery. That this mystery is the *mysterium iniquitatis* does not make it less fit to be the *entrance* door into the entire mystery of the Incarnation. Out of the mouth of babes and sinners.<sup>9</sup>

The first thing to notice about this passage is the use of the word mystery, a word which Illich uses, not in the sense of a puzzle not yet solved, or a problem not yet untangled, but with reference to something which lies beyond the amplitude of our minds, something which our thought, by its nature, cannot penetrate. This is important, I think, because it indicates a mode of thought which takes its disabilities and limitations as a primary given. Illich confesses, in other words, that he does not understand the *corruptio optimi pessima* – it belongs to what he once described to me as “the darkness of God.” Faith can discern the existence of this mystery, insofar as faith can recognize the abysmal difference between the original and its corruptions, but it remains a mystery why things should have happened in this way. Beyond Illich’s agonized confession, which Mitcham quotes, that contemplation of its sinister consequences creates “the temptation of cursing God’s Incarnation,” he does not second guess the will of God in the way implied by Mitcham’s question: “...why not allow the corruption to sponsor a questioning of the original doctrine?” This is the bold question that has Mitcham heading for the exits, but it is not one Illich can ask. That would imply that he could penetrate the mystery, take away what he could never wish removed – the best that has become the worst – and reshape things accordingly.

A second remarkable feature of the statement I have

quoted is the suggestion that the mystery of evil is a back-door into the mystery of the Incarnation –a negative revelation which might yield a positive image in the same way that a photographic print is developed from its negative. Jesus predicts that “the end will come” only when “this gospel of the kingdom [has been] preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations.”<sup>10</sup> Illich’s statement allow this prophecy to be read ironically. Perhaps the gospel *has* been preached throughout the whole world and is even now recognizable by those who are willing to face the uncanny and unsettling quality of our present moment, and, yes, even its horror. This might still be an entrance, as Illich says, a way in, and, perhaps, a way back to the “original doctrine” that Mit-cham seeks. Might this explain why Illich “explores” and “attempts to characterize” the corruption rather than presenting a more solacing view of its providential character as a happy fall that is “prefatory to a greater good?” Perhaps he thought that his *via negativa* –his negative way– with its focus on critique and proscription, would yield this more positive vision, so long as it were pursued courageously and not “relegated to some locked corner of the heart.” But, confronted with a mystery in the sense I specified earlier, he couldn’t actually know this.

Illich’s *corruptio* hypothesis was new, and alarming, and some of his closest associates thought he was unwise to speak as openly to me about it as he did. Charles Taylor recognizes this novelty in his preface to *The Rivers North of the Future* when he says that Illich “changes the very terms of the debate” concerning “the place of Christianity in Western modernity.” For Illich, Taylor says, modernity is “neither the fulfilment, nor the antithesis” of Christianity, neither its secularization

10 Matthew 24:14

nor its overcoming, but rather its perversion.<sup>11</sup> At the time Illich decided to chance an exposition of this idea in the fourteen improvised monologues that he allowed me to record in 1997 and which form the first half of *The Rivers North of the Future*, he felt himself to be “pretty much alone” among historians in his supposition that “modernity can be studied as an extension of Church history.”<sup>12</sup> When I began to investigate his hypothesis after his death, I did find a number of scholars who were working in parallel with Illich. Charles Taylor, who was preparing his *A Secular Age* (2007) at the time of Illich’s death, is one example. Or consider this statement from the concluding pages of John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory* (1990): “In the midst of history, the judgment of God has already happened. And either the Church enacts the vision of the paradisaical community which this judgment opens out, or else it enacts a hellish society beyond any terrors known to antiquity: *corruptio optimi pessima*.”<sup>13</sup> This certainly sounds like Illich, even down to the type of rhetoric –*hellish, terrors*– that Mitcham finds inordinate. René Girard presents the same idea: after the Crucifixion, things will get better and worse *at the same time* because the sacrificial mechanism by which cultures formerly kept the peace with a homeopathic dose of violence has been exposed and disabled, leaving us, Girard says, with “nor more protection against our own violence.”<sup>14</sup>

All these thinkers agree that the Christ event –the Incarnation– is not an event in history, but rather the invention

11 *Rivers*, p. ix

12 *Rivers*, p. 75, 69; in the passage on p. 75 Illich describes himself as “pretty much alone” in finding “the origin of the modern conception of tools” in the uniquely Christian “spirit of contingency,” but I think he felt just as alone in relation to his entire *corruptio* hypothesis.

13 John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, John Wiley and Sons, 2008/1990, p. 442

14 “The Scapegoat: René Girard’s Anthropology of Violence and Religion,” Ideas, CBC Radio, 2001, p. 40; the transcript is here: <https://www.davidcayley.com/transcripts>.



of history; not the creation of a new religion but the demystification of religion itself; not a moment in time but the very pivot on which time turns. Apocalypse, says Ludwig Wittgenstein, is “the view...that things don’t repeat themselves,” and Christianity is an apocalyptic religion.<sup>15</sup> It foresees a final judgment, a decisive ending, and not “the eternal recurrence of all things” that Nietzsche’s Zarathustra preached.<sup>16</sup> Illich, following his *via negativa*, may emphasize the worst into which the best degenerates, while Girard more even-handedly demonstrates their interrelation, but both finally agree that the God who acts *on* history has entered *into* history. Illich once recalled for me a young nun who had asked him earnestly why God had stopped speaking to us, as God evidently had in Biblical times, and then answered her own question by supposing that He might have nothing more to say. The story delighted Illich because it so precisely and innocently illustrated the point I am trying to make. The Incarnation is God’s last word, his final throw of the dice, the point at which humanity must awaken to its own God-nature or begin to worship itself. This character is explicit in the “You have heard it said... but I say to you” structure of the Sermon on the Mount. This either/or can be expressed in a hundred ways, but it can’t be avoided. When Christianity begins to avoid it and slips back into the rut of religion, the *mysterium iniquitatis* goes to work.

Mitcham asks: “Why is it not possible to return to the pre-Christian cosmos that exists on its own in self-sufficient and self-subsistent splendor?” For the Christian, the answer, obviously enough, is: you can’t erase the Incarnation because it has happened. “The surprising and entirely new flowering of love and knowledge” which Illich believes has been made possible by the Incarnation has become a permanent part of

15 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1970, p. 56

16 *The Portable Nietzsche*, ed. Walter Kauffman, Viking Press, 1954, p. 333

the human repertoire and can't be taken away.<sup>17</sup> And yet there certainly has been a powerful neo-pagan current in Western modernity, going all the way back, some would say, to the incorporation of Aristotle into Scholasticism. What Illich shows, I think, is that the (consequences of belief in the Incarnation must be as real for the historian as it is for the one who perceives it through the eyes of faith. We live not just with the “new flowering” that the Incarnation made possible but also with the overwhelming historical consequences that have been induced by those who have believed and who still believe that they can appropriate and administer this Gospel. This is what I think Illich means when he says: “You can't take the Crucifixion away if you want to understand where we have arrived at.”<sup>18</sup> He means that Christianity has by now been ingrained into our languages, our institutions, and our mentalities and ingrained much deeper than conscious thought, so that we are often unaware of this pervasive influence. This is why Illich calls our time “the most obviously Christian epoch,” even though he recognizes how “paradoxical” this claim must be in a time when enlightened opinion believes that it has thoroughly overcome Christianity and now retains it only as a scapegoat. This paradox, by now, lies many layers deep. The extravagances of persecutory “wokeness,” for example, constitute what Girard calls a “super-Christianity,” but this attitude is impregnably defended against recognizing itself as such.<sup>19</sup> The rejection of history that can be seen in contemporary “cancel culture” works in the same way to hide the sources of our culture. The result is impotence and misdirection. We cannot get to grips with our situation because we cannot recognize how it came to pass. We cannot turn off the dy-

17 *Rivers*, p. 47

18 *Ivan Illich in Conversation*, House of Anansi, 1992, p. 243

19 Girard made this remark in 2001 when the hyper-orthodoxy of wokeness was still called political correctness. See *The Scapegoat*, transcript, p. 47

namo because we can't see how it was turned on in the first place. But there is no way out of this dilemma, Illich insists. To dream of a return to the pre-Christian cosmos –to dream of the restored innocence which various “waves of post-modernism” have made “the mood of the new age”– “tastes,” Illich says, “of abdication.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps Illich is wrong. Mitcham, in the last analysis, seems to have concluded that he is. But, if Illich is right, then there is no going back. There is no “pre-Christian cosmos” available, no Heideggerian god to save us.<sup>21</sup> But the “entrance door” that presents itself to us through contemplation of the mystery of evil –even if it begins only as a meditation on the uncanny singularity of our time –is “no less fit,” Illich says, than the door that faith opens– a remarkable statement and one which invites reflection. If the Gospel has been turned “inside out” and this inversion is real and effective all around us, then the task is first to turn it right side out before thinking that we can reach a judgment on the validity of what Mitcham calls “the originating doctrine.”<sup>22</sup> Illich says that “by studying the West as the perversion of Revelation I become *increasingly tentative*, but also *more curious* and totally engaged in *searching* for its origin, which is the voice of him who speaks.”<sup>23</sup> [my italics] That God speaks is not in question here, but the words *tentative*, *curious*, and *searching* all suggest that we cannot just set aside the perversion and resume walking with God in the garden “in the cool of the day” as if nothing had happened.<sup>24</sup> A long history –a history which is part of us, even as we are

20 *Rivers*, p. 182

21 Heidegger told the German newsmagazine *Der Spiegel*, in an interview he allowed to be published only after his death: “We have reached the point where only a God can save us.” (*Der Spiegel*, May 31, 1976)

22 “Hospitality and Pain” - [https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/Illich\\_1423id.pdf](https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/Illich_1423id.pdf) - p. 1

23 *In Conversation*, p. 243

24 Genesis 2:8

part of it— has first to be unthought and rethought— a task that can't even begin until it is recognized that the temporal horizons in which we normally locate ourselves —the whole Antiquity/Middle Ages/Renaissance/ Enlightenment/ Modernity/Post-Modernity scheme— may be seriously misleading. None of these terms are innocent or merely descriptive. The Renaissance was invented in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century to erase the Reformation from the pedigree of the French Revolution and substitute the sanitized classicism that was supposedly being reborn among the political horrors of Quattrocento Italy.<sup>25</sup> The light of the Enlightenment was kindled against the darkness of supposed Christian obscurantism. The Middle Ages were a Protestant invention, designed to portray the Roman Church as a corrupt interlude between primitive Christianity and its revival in Wittenberg. My point, simply, since this is not an essay on the periods into which history should properly be carved, is that the pregnant names in current use all embody some element of anti-Christian or intra-Christian polemic, and so tend to obscure the history which Illich's *corruptio optimi pessima* tries to bring to light. Can we “return” from the world Christianity has made, or reassess its “originating doctrine,” without first getting to grips with the unique and already achieved character of this world?

One of my assumptions here —one that I learned to make in reflecting on Illich's approach to history —is that past and future are indissolubly connected and change in lockstep with one another. What the future can be depends on what we think the past was, and what we think the past was depends in turn on how we imagine the future. James Carse, in his useful book *Finite and Infinite Games* writes, “With each surprise the past reveals a new beginning. Inasmuch as the

25 Eugene Rosenstock-Huessy, *Out of Revolution: Autobiography of Western Man*, New York, William Morrow and Company, 1938, p. 699

future is always surprising, the past is always changing.”<sup>26</sup> Illich said many times that he was sustained by the “hope of... being surprised.”<sup>27</sup> Carse helped me to see that surprise, in changing some aspect of the future, also changes the past. He distinguishes what he calls “finite games” –games with a definite and conclusive outcome– from “infinite games” which are conducted “for the purpose of continuing the play.” “Surprise,” he says, “causes finite play to end; it is the reason for infinite play to continue. Surprise in infinite play is the triumph of the future over the past. Since infinite players do not regard the past as having an outcome, *they have no way of knowing what has been begun there.*” [my italics] And that is how what Carse calls “new beginnings” are revealed. Illich puts the past in question in exactly this way, it seems to me. He soars above the historical landscape –like an eagle, his friend and collaborator Ludolf Kuchenbuch once said –in search of turning points, moments at which he can discern beginnings and endings because these moments exist in a still molten, not yet hardened and fixed state.<sup>28</sup> This method can seem hyperbolic, when taken in the wrong way. In the essay “Vernacular Values,” for example, the Spanish humanist Antonio Nebrija’s first grammar of the Castilian tongue, published at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, is made rather unfairly emblematic of all subsequent deformations of language. Nebrija is accused of firing the opening shot in “a five-century war against vernacular subsistence,” of trying to “chemically...synthesize...a language,” and of wanting to “suppress untutored speech.”<sup>29</sup>

26 James Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games: A Vision of Life as Play and Possibility*, New York: Random House (Ballantyne paperback edition), pp. 22-23

27 “Commencement [Address] at the University of Puerto Rico,” *New York Review of Books*, Oct. 9, 1969, p. 15

28 Kuchenbuch’s comparison was made during a talk at a private gathering at the home of Uwe and Gunhild Pörksen to mark the tenth anniversary of Illich’s death and has not, so far as I know, been published.

29 Ivan Illich, *Shadow Work*, Marion Boyars, 1981, p. 33, 35

This is a heavy indictment to lay against a grammar book, especially when the charge is being entered by a keen grammarian and self-confessed “bibliophile” like Illich, but the point, I think, is not to blame the benighted Nebrija but rather to bring to light a moment at which *things might have been different*.<sup>30</sup> Illich’s reading of Hugh of St. Victor runs along the same lines, even though Hugh as a beloved interlocutor gets what appears superficially to be an utterly different treatment than Nebrija’s supposed “invasion” of the vernacular. The profound similarity is that Hugh too is discovered to be at a turning point, an instant at which, as Elliot says, “past and future are gathered,” a moment of transparency.<sup>31</sup> Hugh stands on a cusp where Illich detects the beginning of the fateful split between head and heart, and between intellectual and spiritual formation, that will give birth to the West’s by now seemingly unstoppable technomania. But Hugh also points backward into the world of “monkish reading” where the wisdom embodied in books still enclosed and surpassed the reader.<sup>32</sup> Hugh’s writings propose a philosophy of technology, in which the “mechanical arts” are seen as a “mirror of truth.”<sup>33</sup> This philosophy died stillborn within a generation as “monasteries,” Illich says tartly, were “converted,” with uncritical enthusiasm, “into machine parks,” but, even so, Illich can apprehend in Hugh’s approach a possible “new beginning”—a different past pointing to a different future, a different future yielding a different past.<sup>34</sup>

30 Ivan Illich, *Text and University*, p. 6 - <https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/TEXTANTL.pdf>. Illich actually says “biblionome” and describes his experience as “biblionomic”; I have substituted the more recognizable word bibliophile for clarity’s sake.

31 T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1943, p. 5

32 Illich describes this turning point at length in *In the Vineyard of the Text* (Chicago, 1993) and again in “Text and University,” op. cit.

33 See “Research by People,” in *Shadow Work*, pp. 77-95, particularly p. 90

34 “Research by People,” p. 91

Mitcham portrays Illich as, in effect, all dressed up with nowhere to go - “trapped,” Mitcham says, between the radiance of the Incarnation and its “disastrous consequences.” I see him as proposing a visionary practice of historical study in which a new past and a new future, north of the future, can be seen arising together. Illich’s approach can hardly be called a method, as it is more of an anti-method, but whatever it is called, I would like to see it first tried before it is rejected. I do not pretend to know what we will finally see through the lens of *corruptio optimi pessima*, what we will ultimately find if we enter “the entire mystery of the Incarnation” through the back door provided by a steady and courageous contemplation of the mystery of evil. All I am saying is that I think this attempt has barely begun. Illich’s sketch remains a sketch, his hypothesis a *hypothesis*.

Mitcham criticizes Illich’s “rhetorical imposition,” and even “violence,” in deploying terms like “monstrosity” and “horror” to describe modernity. Surely there is something “contrived” or “artificial,” Mitcham says, in using words usually reserved for “slasher movies” to describe a “trajectory of spiritual decay or unintentional reversal.” Reading these words summoned a vivid memory of a talk I heard Illich give in the German town of Worpswede in December of 1990. He claimed in this talk –later circulated as “Health as One’s Own Responsibility: No Thank You!”– that a “new ethics of responsibility for health” portended “a bottomless evil which Hitler and Stalin did not reach,” and I remember still how I bridled at that phrase.<sup>35</sup> Surely it was somewhat obscene in the midst of peace and prosperity, and after a good dinner among friends, to claim that “responsibility for health” was in any sense worse than the genocides committed by Hitler and Stalin. Well, it’s true that Illich sometimes liked to shock his

35 (“Health as One’s Own Responsibility – No Thank You!” p. 3: [https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/Illich\\_1429id.pdf](https://www.pudel.samerski.de/pdf/Illich_1429id.pdf))

audiences, but the intervening years have shown me that he spoke quite carefully and deliberately that night. What Illich wanted to do, I now think, was not to engage in the inevitably invidious game of ranking horrors –he urged people to avoid such “apocalyptic randiness”<sup>36</sup>- but rather to draw attention to the unprecedented character of the times he was trying to understand. He did not say that responsibility for health was a worse evil than the Holocaust or the Holodomor, he said that it was unlike these great evils in being *bottomless*. The crimes of Stalin of Hitler, terrifying as they were, could still be plotted on a historical continuum –they had an end, a bottom, a precedent. Contemporary care with its totalitarian ambition and suffocating sentimentality has no end- it swallows reality itself. It is an “evil without meaning” because it destroys all personal significance. What Illich called the “mysterious historicity” of each existence –its bearing a meaning which can never be fully known from the outside- is blotted out by the vast abstraction of *life* in general which it is our duty to manage and save at all costs. How could Illich not have seen this as a horror and a monstrosity? The “best” was not something from which he could turn aside. The evil he believed it had produced was not something he could ignore. He believed that the phenomenon which he found “marvellously expressed” in the phrase *corruptio optimi pessima* was “constitutive of the West” –no less- and of that West which had “shaped him body and soul, flesh and blood.”<sup>37</sup> Where else could he turn?

A final point concerning the incipient “decisionism” towards which Mitcham thinks that Illich’s interpretation of the parable of the Samaritan “points.” The Samaritan, in Mitcham’s reading, exhibits “a freedom of the will empowered

36 See *Illich in Conversation*, p.127

37 Hospitality and Pain, p. 1



with the ability to constitute a new reality.” This seems to me to overlook the fact that the Samaritan, in Illich’s reading, feels *called* to act as he does. It is the reality and urgency of this call that allows and authenticates his action. His will may be involved in his executing the action which he feels called to perform, but it is the call which comes first. One can, of course, ask whether ethics can ever be reliably founded on an experienced call rather than on a set of rules – that is the question Illich’s critics have asked again and again, and I will not attempt an answer here – but I do want to insist that the call, not the will, is primary.

Mitcham says that Buddhism appeals to him in part because of its “ahistoricist character.” It is certainly true that Buddhism has never sought to define and rule history in the way that Christianity has. But it is also true that the one-way history that Christianity invented, by its claim of universal validity, has now actually become, willy-nilly, a universal fate. This being the case, I don’t think we can understand the resulting historical predicament without some version of Illich’s hypothesis that the good and the bad of this situation are inherently related and mysteriously entangled. The decision here is not for one “religion” or another. If we accept Simone Weil’s claim that Christianity ought to contain “all vocations, without exception,” or Illich’s assertion that the Gospel’s good news might have been made compatible with many forms of life as their completion and crowning proportion, not their abolition, then various forms of Christian Buddhism or Buddhist Christianity should be possible.<sup>38</sup> The point towards which I have been stumbling here is that we don’t exactly know what Christianity is in the first place, since most of the names and historical schemes which we now have in place mislead and misdirect us – the very

38 Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, Harper and Row Perennial Library, p. 75: *Rivers*, pp. 196-197

word Christianity not the least. Carl Mitcham sees Illich as “trapped” between “the doctrine [of the Incarnation] and its consequences.” I see him as proposing an untried path by which the presently obscured meaning of that doctrine might be recovered through a courageous and clear-eyed investigation of the results of its misappropriation.