

Secularisation and the Loss of the Feeling Self

-reflections on Ivan Illich's sense of the vernacular

By Trent Schroyer

Secularization produces extraordinary disembodiments that lose the phenomenological density that the 'feeling' body acquired after Christ. The mystery of the incarnation, of God becoming flesh and man becoming divinized, meant that Christian hope was oriented not only to hearing the gospel but also to the vision of God's face.

The gaze of the believer is homesickness for the beyond, for the grace of the face of God. This results in seeking the face of God in the face of everyone, developing an inner sense that is a source of felt body experience in this world. Faith, for Illich, is rooted in the flesh of the body; our tendency to accept modern abstract virtualities as reality loses touch with this sensuous felt body and its intuitive sensing of the sacred.

For Illich modern sensibility has been profoundly disembodied; the gaze is no longer a willed action informed by our moral decisions. The early Church's images in frescoes and icons were linkages of the visible and invisible; gateways and thresholds to what is in heaven. The inner eye sees the inner image. In later scholasticism the visual cone was inverted with the object radiating an image of itself. Seeing is now a passive reception and digestion of images from outside; our eyes are now cameras that receive information. Illich reminds us that many ascetic traditions talk about the guarding and training of the eye, since appropriate seeing is a virtue.

Secularization means the poetic, performative qualities of the world are erased and forgotten in field after field; a world of fitting proportion and appropriateness is replaced by a mechanical world where integrations of common sense are replaced by value assessments of risks and cost-benefits.

For Illich modern evils are best discerned through the eyes of faith. This is because modernity has been 'dis-evil'd' by secularizations which override the felt body's sensibility and substitutes abstractions that sacrifice the present to virtual futures - such as 'progress', 'development', 'globalization', etc.. Illich sees these future-oriented categories as 'man-eating idols'.

Ivan Illich interprets the genesis of Western individualism as beginning in transformations of perception and disembodiment of our senses in the practice of liturgical reading. Reading sacred texts was originally a speaking event where the reader pronounces the undivided line aloud in order to recreate a pilgrimage through the text. Reading was an oral activity in which the page is a vineyard, where the reader tastes the words that are plucked from the page. The pilgrimage of reading leads toward the light and to contemplation and prayer.

Early in the 12th Century, the lines become divided and sub-headings appear, as well as an indexed and numbered sequence of paragraphs and sub-paragraphs. These seemingly minor transformations in mental space ordering actually changed the cultural uses of memory and the practices of relating the eye to the ear, seeing to hearing. Instead of the text being read aloud it now can be read silently, diluting its performative qualities. What was once a public hearing by voice and action became transformed into a 'writ', an external object outside of sensual experience.

The communitarian public-ness of vowing in marriage, or customary holding of land, became a hard copy writ with huge impacts upon lay literacy. The relations of perception and imagination were altered and created a superficial confusion of 'appearing signs' with reality. This confusion of virtual mappings has continued to expand and we now see charts, graphs and statistical probabilities as actualities. The productive role of imagination is to form metaphoric images of the invisible and not get misled by taking abstractive theoretical frames as 'real'. We lose the ability to read the "flesh of the world" and instead orient our attention to virtualities.

Certifications of individual "identity" became a new social expectation that overcame local customary practices. These new symbolizations of the 'individual' provided a new metaphor of the inner conscience-as-text that could be read by authoritative priests, inquisitors and of course God and the devil. Institutionalization of these expectations into juridical processes empowered the monopolies of the Papal Church, and the emerging City and Nation-States, in ways that made the local associations incapable of

providing what the new individual needed. The new 'needy individual' empowered these radical monopolies against communal-vernacular associations and experienced scarcities that communities cannot provide.

Illich's notion of the 'vernacular domain' is where the political and the economic are not disembedded from the cultural. He uses the notion in a generic way to refer to what is lost and colonized by institutional radical monopolies (such as the hospital based medical system, or modern schooling).

How is this view different from other state-oriented political thinking?

Illich claims that 'today in addition to 'who gets what' and the form of technology used, there are two areas of vernacular social choice; one would be public choices oriented to the subsistence use of common environments that would protect local livelihoods. The second is the selection of forms of community or regional intermediary structures that protect the local and foster common sense forms of self-reliance. Such choices have been exercised since time immemorial.

Now, however, globalizing 'development' imperatives emphasize means-end logics of economic growth or efficiency planning. Vernacular choices are viewed as quaint and not "productive" in the computation of national aggregate measures. Indeed vernacular choices are always context specific and take forms that can not be generalized. Where put into practice they are local inversions of 'development' that replace consumer goods by personal action, or industrial monopolies by convivial tools.

Contrary to those who claim Illich is a reactionary these visions do not mean a return to the past. As Illich says: "I do not oppose growth-oriented societies to others in which traditional subsistence is structured by immemorial cultural transmissions of patterns. Such a choice does not exist. Aspirations of this kind would be sentimental and destructive." Reducing Illich to bi-polar thinking misses the point – spiritual practice is the focus.

Living within, and being aware, of limits is the point. Creative forms of intermediary structures converge with current alternative strategies of 'going local', and 'cosmopolitan localism'. These strategies project how vernacular limits are needed to maintain local ecologies, sustain cultural diversities and enable livelihoods. These socio-economic logics of limits are different from the logics of growth-oriented 'sustainable development'. In fact all contemporary anti-globalization movements emphasize non-violent limits, so as to ensure decentralizing and subsidiarity.