

Todd Hartch, The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the Modern West, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 256 pp. ISBN 978-0190204563

Reviewed by Daniel Grego

Reading Todd Hartch Reading Ivan Illich

1.

Sadly, there has never been a time in American history when so many have so articulately identified the God of Christian faith with an idol. Today “God” is understood by many to sanction American capitalism, consumerism, and empire. Identifying “God” with American interests and policies, they can view all opposition to the United States as the expression of evil.

John B. Cobb Jr.
The American Empire and the Commonwealth of God (p. 150.)

In October 2009, Todd Hartch published an article in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (vol. 33, no. 4) entitled: “Ivan Illich and the American Catholic Missionary Initiative in Latin America.” He concluded his analysis this way:

Ultimately, Illich did not have enough trust in the Gospel message, which can transform cultures regardless of missionary ineptitude and bring even American missionaries to Pauline humility. (p. 188.)

Now, in 2015, Hartch has written *The Prophet of Cuernavaca: Ivan Illich and the Crisis of the West*. His publisher, Oxford University Press, promotes the book as “the first biographical account of Illich in English.” (OUP website)

I will be very grateful if Hartch’s writings inspire others to investigate Illich’s life and thought. I would welcome a renaissance of Illich studies. However, I find Hartch’s work so far disappointing. I am not sure he fully understands “the prophet from Cuernavaca.”

Let me begin these reflections by examining his comment about Illich and “the Gospel message.”

2.

Elsewhere, I have written that Illich might best be understood as a “Christian anarchist.” (“Thirteen Ways of Looking at Ivan Illich,” *International Journal of Illich Studies*, Volume 3, No.1.) Two passages from the gospels were of particular importance to him: St. Matthew 4:1-11 and St. Luke 10:25-37.

The verses from St. Matthew describe Jesus’ fast in the desert and his temptation by the Devil. Finding Jesus exhausted and hungry after he had been fasting for forty days and forty nights, the Devil tempts him with three types of power: economic, psychological, and political. Jesus refuses all three. Illich believed that renouncing power was a critical component of “the Gospel message.”

The passage from St. Luke contains the parable of the Good Samaritan. What Illich found so significant in the story was the radical freedom Jesus advocated to step

outside of the traditional boundaries of one's ethnic group and to offer compassion to the other. He told David Cayley:

This doctrine about the neighbor, which Jesus proposes, is utterly destructive of ordinary decency, of what had, until then, been understood as ethical behavior...In antiquity, hospitable behavior, or full commitment in my action to the other, implies a boundary drawn around those to whom I can behave in this way...Jesus taught the Pharisees that the relationship which he had come to announce to them as most completely human is not one that is expected, required, or owed. It can only be a free creation between two people... (*The Rivers North of the Future*, p. 51.)

Given the ethics of the ancient world, as Illich understood them, the Samaritan did not have any obligation to aid the Jew he found beaten up on the side of the road. Yet, he was moved to help him and stepped beyond the boundary of what was expected to do so.

Perhaps even more important for Illich's understanding of "the Gospel message" was the "good news" of the Incarnation. (What a lovely coincidence that Illich's first assignment as a priest was to Incarnation Parish in New York.) Illich believed he could find Christ in the eyes of everyone he met, which is one of the reasons he was so critical of anything that came between him and the other, whether it was technology or the preconceptions of Freudianism, Marxism, or even the evangelism of the church.

Illich was prophetic in the sense that he often saw the future implications of policies or techniques long before others. With his belief in the renunciation of power, or domination, and in his embrace of radical freedom, Illich may have seen the missionary movement in Latin America in the 1960s as the type of idolatry that John B. Cobb Jr. describes above. I think it's possible that it was Illich's *complete trust* in "the Gospel message," as he understood it, which led him to oppose that movement as energetically as he did.

3.

I think Hartch is ill-served by his publisher promoting *The Prophet of Cuernavaca* as a "biography." It's not.

Illich's life can be divided into thirds: the first from his birth in Vienna in 1926 until his ordination in Rome in 1951; the second from his time working as a priest at Incarnation Parish in New York until the closing of the Center for Intercultural Documentation, or CIDOC, in 1976; and the final third consisting of his itinerant teaching at various universities in Europe and the United States during which time he presided over a "traveling circus" of colleagues and friends with whom he examined the "certainties" underlying the modern West until his death in Bremen in 2002.

Hartch's book offers very little about the first and last thirds of Illich's life. His focus is on the period between 1951 and 1976, with most of his attention devoted to Illich's work in Puerto Rico, Mexico, and other parts of Latin America in the 1960s.

In the end, Hartch's conclusions in his book are similar to those of his 2009 article: Illich was wrong to oppose the missionary movement in Latin America because it was Illich's own experience in Latin America that led to his radical critique of the modern West. Hartch writes:

Without his appreciation of Puerto Rican folk Catholicism, of village life, of peasant culture, of life lived outside of industrial society, there would have been no attack on missions, no *Deschooling Society*, no *Medical Nemesis*. (p. 166.)

He continues:

Who knows what would have happened if the priests, sisters, and lay missionaries discouraged by Illich had poured into Latin America? ...Isn't it possible...that some of them would have seen what Illich saw? Even the trickle of missionaries who did serve in Latin America has provided its share of critics of American culture, politics, and religion. Imagine if there were a thousand more such people active in American life today. (pp. 166-167.)

When I read this argument, I could not help remembering another American "intervention" in the "Third World." There were soldiers who returned from Southeast Asia "radicalized," who founded the Vietnam Veterans against the War. Would this fact have been justification for the U.S. to continue that criminal, immoral war?

As Illich saw, even when the intentions are “good,” or perhaps *especially* when the intentions are “good,” the damage done to indigenous cultures by these invasions can be huge. I think Hartch would benefit from seeing Carol Black’s powerful film, “Schooling the World: the White Man’s Last Burden.” And, although the report came out after the release of Hartch’s book, he should also consider the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which concluded that Canadian missionaries perpetrated “cultural genocide” on the First Nations peoples of that country.

As Hartch notes, Illich wasn’t completely against North Americans visiting Latin America, as long as they came (paraphrasing David Cayley from *Part Moon, Part Travelling Salesman*) “in all humility...with something to learn, rather than as developers and modernizers with something to teach.” But this is not easy. As Thomas Merton wrote in “A letter to Pablo Antonio Cuadra Concerning Giants”:

The greatest sin of the European-Russian-American complex which we call “the West,” is not only greed and cruelty, not only moral dishonesty and infidelity to truth, but above all *its unmitigated arrogance towards the rest of the human race.* (Italics in the original text.) *The Collected Poems of Thomas Merton* (p. 380.)

I think Illich’s campaign against “the war on subsistence” was partially informed by his experiences in Puerto Rico and Mexico. How could it not be? But, I think the more important basis for his critique came, as I mentioned above, from his complete trust in the Gospel message, as he understood it.

Again, I will be grateful if Hartch's book attracts others to study Illich's life and work. I was impressed with his extensive research into the intrigues in which Illich was engaged in the middle third of his life. But, after reading *The Prophet of Cuernavaca*, I still don't think Hartch really "gets" Illich.

For a while now, I have believed we need three books: an "Illich Reader" in which the most important essays from Illich's published work are gathered in one volume for students and scholars; a "Posthumous Illich," created by a multilingual team of scholars, containing the best of Illich's yet-to-be published writings; and a good intellectual biography. We still need all three.

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