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THE BEGINNING OF THE END

CAYLEY: I've read through my transcript of your talks of two years ago several times, and there are some points which I would like to try to clarify. In that conversation, you again and again reverted to the idea of the mystery of evil, which Paul first speaks about in his letter to the Thessalonians. Since that time I have had a chance to reread Paul's letters, and it seems to me that Paul is saying that the Incarnation is, so to speak, the beginning of the end. Something has happened that changes everything — irreversibly.

ILLICH: Yes, and he has this immensely consoling statement that he suffers whatever it is that he suffers — let's say it was epilepsy — in order to fulfill what is still missing and is, therefore, holding back the end.[1] To paraphrase Paul: Bearing the annoyance my neighbour causes me with humour and devotion might be just the last straw needed. By every instance in which one of us associates himself plainly with the suffering of Christ, he might just trigger the end. It's a gloriously consoling idea, and Paul claims — I believe legitimately — that this is a way in which I may look at the course of my own life. We might be contributing to it at this very moment.

I have this funny watch on my arm, with a moving part to indicate seconds. I used to wonder whether the next click might be the last. You know the story of the old Rabbi that Erich Fromm always told and retold. His wife said, I have to wash your socks. So he took off his

shoe and gave her one sock. She said, can't you give me the second one? He said, no, I never get out of both shoes at the same time. I want to be ready when the Messiah comes.

CAYLEY: But what has changed with the Incarnation? Why is it the beginning of the end?

ILLICH: When Mary brought forth the Word of God in the flesh, something happened cosmically which, until that moment, had happened each time a woman proved to herself and others that her pregnancy was real by bearing the child she hoped for. The prophets were fulfilled. The stammerings of the prophets were legitimated in the only way that, until the twentieth century, a pregnancy could be legitimated — postpartum — because the kid is there. So that's the first thing that has changed. The second thing is that, from that moment on, any prophetic act or word is not only a hope but faith in the carnal presence of God. When I interpret twelfth-century texts for the graduate students, colleagues, and other regulars at my class, most of whom would regard what I just said as fantasy or ideology, they say, So you mean that Christians believe that a man is God. Now you're unlikely to hear Christians say this. I have listened to Catholics and Episcopalians, and they will generally put things the other way round — God comes first. But for Joseph the baby came first. Faith in the Incarnation can flower in our time precisely because faith in God is obscured, and we are led to discover God in one another. This seems to me important — more important than ever — because of the deepening obscurity which has been spread in recent years by those who claim that certain physical and mathematical features of the universe lead them to postulate, as a very fruitful hypothesis, a God — a constructed God — behind the Big Bang.[2] And I laugh, and I say, come, let's look at a crib — and I try to explain to them what a crib is — that there are many kids in many parts of the world where I have been whose mothers bundle them into a dirty coat on a street corner a few hours after their birth . . .

CAYLEY: You also argued in our earlier conversations that with the Incarnation, sin changed its meaning. And that is another point on which I wanted to invite you to say more.

ILLICH: In my opinion, Christ opened our eyes, in a unique and definite way, to the relationship between David and Ivan at this very moment. You can say between an I and a Thou, if you want to. I am increasingly certain that I can convince anyone whom you might bring up to me as an *adversarius* that there was nothing of this kind before Christ revealed it, though there might be things that look a little bit alike. Last time, if I remember rightly, we spoke about the Samaritan — a Palestinian, who doesn't worship at the Temple in Jerusalem — who walks down the street, sees a Jew lying there beaten, and turns to him. Like the Samaritan, we are critters that find their perfection only by establishing a relationship, and this relationship is arbitrary from everybody else's point of view, except the Samaritan's, because he does it on the call of the beaten-up Jew. But, as soon as this possibility is established, it can also be broken and denied. A possibility of infidelity, turning away, coldness has been created which could not have existed before Jesus revealed this possibility. So sin in this sense did not exist. Without the glimmer of mutuality, the possibility of its denial, its destruction, could not be thought. A new kind of "ought" has been established which is not related to a norm. It has a *telos*. It aims at somebody, some body; but not according to a rule. And it has become almost impossible for people who today deal with ethics or morality to leave out chatter about norms. They attempt to relate the "ought" to norms.

CAYLEY: In our earlier conversation you reacted strongly against my using the term "post-Christian" to characterize our time. You said, No, our age is not post-Christian, it is apocalyptic. And I would like to hear more about what you think it means to live in an apocalyptic world.

ILLICH: When I refused to designate our time as post-Christian, and insisted on its being apocalyptic, I did it as a would-be pupil of

Aquinas: *per fidem quaerens intellectum*, and *per intellectum quaerens fidem*, by faith seeking historical understanding of the time since Bethlehem; and, on the other hand, by intelligence seeking to understand the first and second Christian millennia. The world was changed forever by the appearance of a community — therefore a "here" and a "there" — based entirely on the contribution of each one, no matter what his rank, in the *conspiratio* of the liturgical kiss. A community was created by a somatic interchange and not by some cosmic or natural referent. When a "we" can come into existence as the result of a *conspiratio*, we are already outside of time. We are living already in the time of the Spirit.

One consequence is the appearance of a new type of evil which I call sin. It is thoroughly different from any non-good that can be framed in secular terms. It is also different from old ideas of the non-good as that which is disharmonious, not fitting, nonproportional. These terms are also insufficient to express the evil which is sin. Today I live in a world in which evil has been replaced by disvalue, negative value. We face something for which in German with its ease in combining terms I was able to coin the name diseviling (*Entbösung*) — I launched this word twenty years ago in Germany and it made people laugh. You can't have disharmony on a tempered piano; you can't have disharmonious buildings once you have lost the idea of architectural orders, as Joseph Rykwert has shown in his book *The Dancing Column*. So, within this apocalyptic period of two thousand years, we come first to diseviling; and then, in our time to something which for lack of a better word I would call misplaced concreteness, or perhaps mathematization or algorithmization, which Uwe Pörksen tried to describe with his idea of plastic words. During 1,500 years our entire social and political thinking were based on the secularization of the Samaritan, which means the technicization of the question of what to do when somebody in trouble suddenly surprises me on my way to somewhere else. Did I answer you?

CAYLEY: Well, let me see if I can paraphrase what you've just said: Diseviling, which occurs when the sense of proportion is lost, is a possibility that comes into existence only when Jesus expands the

horizon of the possible by the answer which he gives to the Pharisees . . . You are saying that the whole post-Bethlehem era is apocalyptic by definition.

ILLICH: Yes, but in modern usage this means some sort of disaster. To me it means revealing, or unveiling. Our conversation of two years ago, which we now want to try to deepen, deals with my hypothesis that the corruption of the best is the worst. And it is part of this hypothesis that the Church's attempt to give this worldly power, social visibility, and permanence to the performance of ortho-doxy, right faith, and to the performance of Christian charity, is not un-Christian. As I understand the Gospels, with many others, it is part of the *kenosis*, the humiliation, the condescension of God in becoming man and founding or generating the mystical body which the Church understands itself to be, that this mystical body would itself be something ambiguous. It would be, on the one hand, a source of continued Christian life, through which individuals acting alone and together would be able to live the life of faith and charity, and, on the other hand, a source of the perversion of this life through institutionalization, which makes charity worldly and true faith obligatory. Now why do I say this? Because I believe that the one way in which I can look hopefully at what has happened during my lifetime is to say, God's goodness and power shines more gloriously than ever in the fact that he can tolerate — I'll come back to this word — the this-worldliness of his church which has become the seed from which modern service organizations have grown.

Let me put it in other words that are easier to understand. I, at least, believe that I do not live in a post-Christian world, I live in an apocalyptic world. I live in the *kairos*[3] in which the mystical body of Christ, through its own fault, is constantly being crucified, as his physical body was crucified and rose again on Easter day. I am therefore expecting the resurrection of the Church from the humiliation, for which the Church itself must be blamed, of having gestated and brought forth the world of modernity.

The resurrection lies behind us. What we now have to expect is not the resurrection of the Lord, nor the bodily ascension to heaven

of our lady Mary, this strange girl whom I have not been able to help having as my ideal since I was boy. It's the resurrection of the Church; and, when I say I believe in the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting, the resurrection of the dead for me stands for the resurrection of the Church.

You came and said you wanted to talk to me about the *corruptio optimi quae est pessima* [the corruption of the best which is the worst], about the fact that wherever I look for the roots of something which is a modern certainty, I find that in the course of what we now call the second millennium it grew out of the Church and became, in my opinion, not a post-Christian reality, but a perverted Christian reality. The term post-Christian could be taken as implying a renewed innocence, in which evil becomes once again sinless and just plain evil. The way I judge and hope to accept modern institutions is not as plain evil but as sinful, as the attempt to provide by human means what only God calling through the beaten-up Jew could give to the Samaritan, the invitation to act in charity.

CAYLEY: Mircea Eliade, whom I used to read, speaks of the Christian "valorization of time." After Bethlehem, as you said earlier, time, for Christians, acquires a definite and irreversible direction, and is no longer cyclical. And this direction, according to Eliade, is preserved even in Christianity's modern secular descendants, like Marxism, which is still, in a sense, expecting the end. But, in the last fifteen years or so, people have begun to adopt the term postmodernity, which might suggest a return to cyclical time and the renewed innocence of which you just spoke.

ILLICH: If I rightly understand you, you are fishing for my reflections, or even feelings, about the mood in what is called postmodern poetry, novels, and philosophy, about what has happened to the temporal dimension, to temporality in the course of our lifetime. How has that passage, that mountain we came across in the 1970s, affected our sense of — I use the word for lack of anything better — timeliness and spatiality and frontier — the three inevitably go together. Now in order to speak about this transition, this transformation, the trans-

mogrification to which you allude — we both know what you are alluding to even though we are not quite certain precisely what we are speaking about, and that's one of the difficulties in this particular conversation — in order to understand this transmogrification, I at least have to look at it historically. Where did it start to become what it is now? And once things are historical, once we claim that they have an end, at least in the mind, and the feeling, and the body and the breathing of some people, we already imply and assume that they have at some time had a beginning. Now the timeliness and spatiality and frontier which belonged to the certainties of existence in our youth, and much more in my father's youth, are of a kind for which the Middle Ages and the times before had no sense or taste. The simplest way of telling you about it might be to tell you about an international meeting of designers at which I was recently invited to give the opening speech. I took along two others in order to do it well. The meeting was held in a red plush theatre in Amsterdam. The organizers wanted to demand that henceforth all designers include in their designs the category of speed, because of the importance in our lives of slowing down. The twenty-first century must be slow rather than fast, it must belong to Slow but Better Workers — one of these millennial fantasies. And the argument I tried to make there was, I'm an historian, and I know that the very concept of speed is something that before Galileo wasn't there. When Galileo first conceived miles per hour, or more precisely distance in a given time, he knew that he was breaking a taboo by relating time and space to each other as distinct entities. The here and now, *hic et nunc*, related so intimately to each other that you could not speak of the one without speaking of the other. Galileo claimed that he could observe time apart from space. What news? Everybody knows that. No! He had the greatest of difficulty in making himself understood. Analysis of this idea of integration would require the invention of the infinitesimal calculus by Leibniz and Newton. Today the concept of time on which modernity based itself is in crisis in modern physics, in modern philosophy, and in modern biology. No question about this. But my point here is that the modern concept of time was already unrelated to lived duration, to the "forever" in the marriage vow, which doesn't mean

"without end" but "now totally." In order to create the possibility of experiencing watch-less time in my classes, I ask that someone inform me when it's time for a toilet break. We have to engage in an asceticism which makes it possible to savour nowness and hereness, here as place, here as that which is between us, as the kingdom is. This is a most important task if we are to save what remains in us of the sense of meaning, of metaphor, of flesh, of touch, of gaze.

But here I find myself in a difficulty. Hunger for an ascetically cultivated sense of here is very intense, and from what I know of the waves of postmodernism to which you refer, it could be said that living that way is the mood of the new age. This hunger arises from a technologically produced mood of impotence in relation to the now. It has taken the place of the emphasis on planning and hope for the future which prevailed in the previous generation. But it tastes to me of abdication, of letting go, of indiscipline. What I want to cultivate, in myself, and with friends, is not impotence but powerlessness, a powerlessness which does not forego awareness of the here and now between the Jew and the Samaritan. Perhaps Thomas Aquinas can help clarify things. Thomas, in his unique and incredibly fragile way — I and some of my friends believe that Thomism is like a delicate vase, something glorious but apt to be broken when it is moved out of its time — Thomas insists very strongly that you can think about timeliness only when you distinguish time not just from eternity, which has no beginning and end, but also from a third type of duration which he calls *aevum*. *Aevum* is the type of survival and togetherness for which you and I are destined. It has no end but I know that it had a beginning even if I can't remember it precisely. I might have mentioned to you this man whom Gerhart Ladner made me love, Petrus Hispanus. Some medievalists take him as an example of the form which schizophrenia took in the Middle Ages, but Ladner pointed out the marvellous metaphors he uses. Petrus says that as people who live in the *aevum*, we sit on the horizon. The horizon is the line which divides us from nose to behind into two parts. One side sits in time, the other in the *aevum*. This is the sense I want to convey of our being a creature who lives in a now and forever which is contingent at every moment on the creative act of God.

And with this, the contemporary return to cyclical time, or to no time, or to living awake as if I were in a trance, has nothing in common.

CAYLEY: I hope you'll forgive my persistence, and, perhaps, my bluntness, but I want to keep pushing on what I get from the post-Resurrection New Testament: the sense that the end has begun and will soon occur . . .

ILLICH: I know you are struck by these guys with their happy trust that the light in the East would come tomorrow, and, if not tomorrow, the day after tomorrow; but, on the other hand, what a privilege to live in a time when our hope has lost its this-worldly, calendar, and watch-related scaffolding. We are in an age of scaffoldless hope.

CAYLEY: Recently I was looking at the Letter of James in the New Testament, and I read there that he who doubts is like the sea buffeted by waves.[4] He will have no friend in the Lord because he is of two minds, he is of a divided mind. Perhaps I don't know how to read this, but I would think that if I was of only two minds, in the circumstances in which I've grown up, I'd be doing well . . .

ILLICH: This has something to do with what Aelred says about friendship. What happens between the Jew and the Samaritan is a seed. When it grows up, it will be buffeted, and perhaps the stem will even be broken and it will never come to flower. What we hold on to is the seed. Not all friendships are beautiful or glorious or fully developed. That I leave to the psychologists. Faith, in its root, is a gift which demands my faith in my own faith. In its manifestation it can be terribly buffeted. And, if I understand James properly, I shouldn't glory in surviving my doubts. I should rather humbly, powerlessly hold on to the deep root in the heart. And so it is with love and charity. They are supernatural gifts. The difficulty is that 90 per cent of the people I am given to address would say, Oh God, what is that? And yet I think that people today are more capable than they were thirty years ago of understanding what I say when I talk about gifts

which are like seeds, no matter what happens historically, biographically, to them. The apocalypse is the moment at which the meaning of my own life will be revealed to me. That's something totally different from autobiography, or, even worse, biography. Hagiographers once tried to pursue this mysterious historicity of each life. By now everyone is too much infected by psychology to be able to grasp this fleshy side of what's between me and you. Or, therefore, this scaffoldless hope.

CAYLEY: You spoke earlier about God's tolerance for the worldliness of his Church and said you would return to that word.

ILLICH: I did use that word. An hour later I'm not so sure I should have used the expression "God is tolerant." God is merciful. But mercy is something incredibly difficult to explain today. The Semitic languages have a word for it which comes from the root *raham*. When you look into the etymology, you'll see that it is related to the womb, and to Nature. The womb in the state of love, this is what *raham* means. The seventy rabbis who translated the Bible into Greek had great difficulty in finding a non-Semitic Greek equivalent, and they took the word *eleos*, which is tinged by pity, even for the Greeks. *Eleos* is something which Plato in a beautiful passage considers acceptable in women and kids, but not in mature men. And Aristotle corrects him and says, Unless these mature men act as lawyers and try to get pity from the jury for the accused. Alms, alms-giving, is an English way of saying *eleos*. It survives in the form of the English word eleemosynary, which comes to us via Latin. When I spoke about the tolerance of God, I really meant to speak about his *raham*. Five times a day, a good Moslem throws himself down towards the East, alone, with others who are also alone standing next to him, facing Allah. And in the first sentence of his prayer, the word *raham* appears twice.[5] After all we have said today, I at least am amazed. I could fantasize doubts which buffet me. Can one believe in the existence of somebody who has created the mess which I have described to you? The mystery that God still exists is indicated by naming him the merciful. After all, this is what we call sweet sorrow.

Is it possible that anyone who knows me, as only he knows me, would stand me? It's sweet because from there faith, hope, and charity can grow. Today we would speak about self-acceptance. I don't need a self in order to accept, in order to make an effort to accept the fact that he stands me.

CAYLEY: Let me say, finally, then, that as I understand it the mystery of evil — my Jerusalem Bible says the mystery of wickedness — is precisely the fall of the Church, it's precisely the creation of the Christian "religion."

ILLICH: Yes, it is instrumentalized, or instrumentally maintained, truth and charity . . . machines for doing one or the other.

CAYLEY: And do you think you're taking a liberty with Paul's intention in writing those words to the Thessalonians in interpreting them that way?

ILLICH: No, I don't think I take a liberty. God help me.