



# Catholic Pastoral and Prophetic Responses to a Secularizing Landscape

JOHN SULLIVAN 

Liverpool Hope University, [sullivj@hope.ac.uk](mailto:sullivj@hope.ac.uk)

**Abstract:** The purpose of this article is to offer a retrieval of some major themes in the writings of Romano Guardini and Ivan Illich, two twentieth century Catholic priests who responded to secularization in ways that could be described as both pastoral and prophetic. Guardini tended towards a more pastoral emphasis, while Illich's stance was more prophetic. Guardini exemplified a Catholic way to bridge the gap often experienced between faith, life and culture. Illich demonstrated how a Catholic can address their culture in a way that is both challenging and fertile and does so in penetrating observations about contemporary secular professions and preoccupations. The article has three parts. In part one, I sketch a range of responses to Christianity that have emerged in an increasingly secular culture, as well as the types of response that Christians have made to such a culture. In parts two and three a representative sample of the writings of Guardini and Illich is drawn on and analysed, together with a range of secondary literature on Guardini and Illich, in order to explain the nature and the role of four key themes (in each case) within their overall outlook. For Guardini, in part two, these are Catholic worldview, liturgy, providence and cultural critique. For Illich, in part three, I examine his notion of the mission of the Church, his treatment of schooling, his understanding that modernity is a perversion of Christianity, and his advocacy of friendship as a healing and liberating mode of engaging the world.

**Keywords:** Catholic worldview, liturgy, providence, cultural critique, church, renunciation of power, schooling and dependency, modernity as a perversion of Christianity, friendship

After an initial sketch of responses to Christianity in our culture and of responses to this culture by Christians, I focus on two exemplars of Catholic responses to secularization, very different in tone, style and emphasis: Romano Guardini (1885–1968) and Ivan Illich (1926–2002). Although each of these priests could justifiably be described as offering both a pastoral and a prophetic approach in their dealings with individuals and through their critique of society, Guardini tended towards a more pastoral emphasis, while Illich's stance was more prophetic. Both offered an analysis and a critique of developments in the society and culture of their time. While their insights, even when combined, do not suffice on their own as comprising a comprehensive Catholic response to a secularizing landscape for our time, they provide an indication of some key features needed as part of such a response.

The work of both Guardini and Illich has been taken up, not only by Christians outside Catholicism, but also by people of other faiths and by those who claim no religious affiliation. Guardini's writings on literature, as well as those on the challenges for modern culture posed by technology, have a wider appeal than merely to

his fellow Catholics and to other Christians. Many of Illich's writings were addressed to – and received widespread commentary from – a secular readership. However, my retrieval of central aspects of the work of Guardini and Illich is intended to bring out some of the richness of the resources inherent in Catholicism, resources that can help Catholics to engage discerningly, constructively and effectively with an increasingly secularizing landscape.

## 1. Facing the Challenge of Secularization

Secularization can refer to the process where there occurs a transfer of control or influence over key features and functions of society – for example, education, health, social welfare, politics and morality – from the Church to secular bodies. It can also refer to a situation in which there is a notable decline in numbers of those espousing and practising religious belief and the rise in numbers of those claiming allegiance to no religion. While lamented by some Christians, neither of these two signs of secularity necessarily imply any serious undermining of the mission and role of the church; indeed, the loss of ecclesial power and the turning away from church attendance may allow for a more authentic expression of the church's nature and indicate a smaller but more sincere committed church membership than is the case when affiliation to a church was a cultural necessity. Charles Taylor suggests a third sense of the emergence of secularity, one that is more challenging for – and potentially corrosive of – Christian self-confidence: “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others,” (Taylor 2007, 3) contested and questioned, if not resisted and resented by major cultural agencies and forces. In such a society it becomes harder (though, of course, not impossible) to admit to Christian faith and to express such faith openly. Without a doubt, secularization – in all three senses just described – also affects faiths other than Christianity, though in different ways, according to the relative weight that adherents of these faiths attribute to such features as their scriptures and doctrines, their structures of authority, and their understanding of community and tradition. How it does so is beyond the scope of this article.

The process of secularization might overlap with, or even lead to secularism – a worldview that seeks to deny any public authority or privilege to religious belief, either of individuals or of religious institutions – but that is not an inevitable or necessary outcome of secularization. A highly secularized society might still constitute a benign and hospitable space for Christians and people of other faiths, depending on the nature of the secularist elements within it and depending on the authority that society grants to those elements. Generally, however, secularization tends to

erode our connections with history, culture and community, because of the habits of thought and lifestyle that accompany secularizing processes.

Christian faith has met with a range of responses within different cultures and societies. Some people have expressed great hostility to the Church because of experiences of abuse, authoritarianism, or unloving behaviour by church leaders or by the Christians they have come across. Some have displayed great ignorance about the faith, while others, even if they possess some knowledge about it, remain indifferent, seeing it as irrelevant to their concerns in life. Others again seem to be highly selective in apparently adopting some kind of partial, but incomplete, and thus distorted acceptance of the faith. They borrow some Christian values, but do so blindly, unaware of their source or their true nature.

Even after acknowledging the very real opposition to Christianity that does exist in various sectors of society, it could well be argued that the more damaging factor for the Church is the weakness of Christians' positive presentation of and practical witnessing to the faith when they do have the opportunity for this. It could be argued that Christians have not offered in the past, and are still not offering, a serious, cogent and winsome counter-culture and alternative vision for humanity in the Church and in Church-sponsored bodies, including her schools and higher educational institutions.

A recent commentator on the situation of the Church in modern society deploys two striking images to emphasize the challenge to be faced (Maspero 2022, 56). First, he likens today's believers to "hostesses or stewards on airplanes who explain safety rules before take-off, without being heard by anyone." Then he refers to the risk that Christians might be perceived as "custodians of a museum, constantly confronted with beautiful realities, whose salvific content has, however, been forgotten." These two images might prompt Christians to reflect on how they are being received by society and why they are being received as they are.

Just as one can discern a range of responses to Christian faith in modern culture, so too there is a range of responses by Christians to a secularizing landscape. Some seek to combat and reconquer the world and to re-establish Christendom. Others prefer the path of withdrawal from society, in order to be uncontaminated by its evils. A third category, while claiming to hold onto their faith, are willing to be accommodating to cultural norms, and in doing so, often end up self-secularizing. A fourth response is to use secular "tools" to modernize the church or in an attempt to communicate her message more effectively, for example, through better management techniques to improve leadership, or by deploying sociological data to inform decision-making and to analyse what is going on "on the ground," or via the use of new media in order to communicate the faith in ways recognizable to digital natives. Alternatively, a fifth approach has its focus on dialogue and encounter, in an attempt to reach out, in a reconciling manner, to the disaffected, the wounded, those with alternative worldviews and those who are searching for meaning and purpose in life.

With a sharper edge and tone of voice than the culture of dialogue and encounter, sixth, there are those who call for a more militantly prophetic emphasis, where the current idols before which many people worship (or give their allegiance) are confronted and critiqued. For Searle, “The prophet sees the present in the light of eternity and is able to perceive God’s redemptive purposes in the world. ... The truly prophetic figure is someone who is aware of the spiritual forces acting in history and knows all the possibilities contained within the infinite sphere of the effective action of God for whom all things are possible” (Searle 2018, 27). In reading the signs of the times and finding where God is pointing us to, Searle asserts that prophecy can involve lamentation, exhortation, and protest about the present situation followed by ending the tendency for Christians to retreat into religious clubs (Searle 2018, 28) and, instead, offering a courageous and confident response of confrontation, outreach and demonstrating an alternative lifestyle.

Closely linked to the call for a more prophetic stance towards the world, there is the powerful cultural commentary given by Phil Davignon (2023). Davignon interrogates the practical atheism he sees as pervasive in society, including among many of those who claim to be Christians. By practical atheism, he means living as if God does not exist. Davignon proposes that “Culture is not only transmitted through liturgies that directly shape people’s desires, imagination, and identity, but also within more mundane social practices that quietly form enduring dispositions (virtues or vices). Even if these dispositions do not directly shape one’s ultimate desires, they still incline people to think, feel, and act in ways that are either hospitable or inhospitable to the Christian life” (Davignon 2023, xvi).

If culture is most powerfully transmitted implicitly, via “taken-for-granted habits, routines and practices,” for example, in the family, in education, in the world of work, and in a consumerist lifestyle, and if these contexts are organized according to secular assumptions and values, rather than in the light of the Gospel, these domains of life “foster habits and dispositions that undermine people’s ability to fully embody the Christian faith in their daily lives” (Davignon 2023, xvii). Davignon poses an important question for Christians of any church to ponder: “Do congregations offer the kind of formation that could offset the secularizing effects of modern culture?” (Davignon 2023, 89).

James Davison Hunter (2010) calls for Christians to exercise a faithful presence in the world, while at the same time not being *of* the world. Sherry Weddell (2012) sees the need to rejuvenate and to revitalize the faith community. From an Eastern Orthodox perspective, Evi Voulgaraki-Pissina (2023) believes that, in order to foster Christian witness amidst the desert of post-modern cities, what is required is a re-discovery of theology. She claims that “We need to apply ourselves, with devotion, diligence, and love, to studying the riches of our tradition” in order to present to the world “a moving, flexible, living faith” (2023, 6).

As a final example, Carmody Grey and Oliver Dürr advise Christians, faced with a society that scarcely knows Christianity at all, to focus on the nature and needs of humanity, rather than to rely on traditional religious language.

If we seek to locate and articulate, in order to reflectively engage, the horizons within which contemporary northern Europeans generally live, the goods that orient people's lives, and the ideas and values that move and motivate them, we need to talk not about "religion" and the lack of it, but about the idea of the human. Within the concept of the human is nested today the sense of orientation, meaning, goodness and importance that notions of "religion" used to express (Grey and Dürr 2023, 1).

In giving attention to the nature and needs of the human person, Christians should ask, in common with other questioners from diverse worldviews: "What fulfils her; what hurts her; what renders her life meaningful, worthwhile, or not; what makes it possible for her, despite everything, to go on" (Grey and Dürr 2023, 15). This constitutes a call for a renewed form of Christian humanism, one that equips members of the Church to engage constructively and winsomely with contemporary culture (Sullivan 2021a).

These diverse responses are not necessarily alternatives; some can be and have been combined. Nor do they exhaust the possibilities for ways to respond to secularization. In what follows I explore in more depth the responses of two Catholic priests to a world they saw as increasingly being secularized. Guardini is better known within the Church, while Illich is better known outside it.

## 2. Romano Guardini

Ordained in 1910 and having completed two theses on Bonaventure in 1915 and 1922, Romano Guardini served as Professor in the Philosophy of Religion and Catholic Worldview at the University of Berlin from 1923 until 1939. He exercised throughout this period a leadership role in Quickborn, a German Catholic youth movement. After the Second World War he again taught as Professor of Philosophy of Religion and Christian Worldview, first, at the University of Tübingen (1945–1948) and from 1948–1962 at the University of Munich. Pastoral in tone, emphasis and ethos, he set about equipping people to engage in the life of faith, constantly providing formation and encouragement, especially to young Catholics, displaying sensitivity and gentleness. From a young age, he formed study circles with friends. Later he fostered similar networks for students and young people more generally, where they discussed literature, theatre and art as well as matters of faith. He also led retreats and pilgrimages, and organised social events for the young he was nurturing. Active in pastoral

ministry, he never restricted his time and energy to the academy. A regular preacher, he took seriously new communication media, such as films, radio and television. A telling glimpse of how he saw himself is given by Jane Lee-Barker when she quotes Guardini: “I found myself the type of brotherly priest who does not act out of his official position but carries the priesthood in himself as a pastoral force; who does not confront the faithful as the owner of authority but stands next to them ... [and] joins them in their searching and asking in order to arrive with them at common results” (Lee-Barker 2022, 36).

Not only was he fluent in German and Italian, languages spoken at home, he also learned Latin, Greek, French and English. Before studying theology he had tried chemistry and economics. He wrote books about Dante Alighieri, Michel de Montaigne, Blaise Pascal, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Friedrich Hölderlin, Rainer Maria Rilke, Socrates, Augustine and Søren Kierkegaard. His writing was a blend of personalism, existentialism, scriptural reflections, explorations of the liturgy, interpretations of literature, cultural commentary and opening up mystical dimensions. He made important contributions to the renewal of church thinking on the liturgy, Christology, the church and theological anthropology – all of which contributed to how he revealed aspects of a Catholic worldview. The many questions he addressed included: What difference does having Christian faith make as we engage with the world? What does it mean to live from the Church? What is the relation between faith and culture? As a recent commentator on the thought of Guardini has observed, his books “transcend the boundaries between theology, philosophy, literary criticism, and human biography and they touch on psychology, sociology, and numerous other areas” (Lee-Barker 2022, 7).

This rich intellectual hinterland, combined with his warm and pastoral concern, his essential humility, and his facility in making connections between contemporary culture and the living tradition of Catholicism marked him out as a distinctive voice and as an attractive representative of the faith. One admirer, referring to Guardini as a sapiential theologian, claims that “A writer such as Guardini stands as a prophetic alternative to those theologians who have allowed their work to become so academically rarified that they cannot speak beyond the narrow limits of their academic specialty” (Cunningham 1995, 70). It was his close attention to the real-life contexts and experiences of those he hoped to reach that shaped how he communicated the faith. He acknowledged the diverse ways that people come to and experience faith in different ways according to their circumstances. “The structure of faith will be one thing for those who educate, teach, heal, assist, and serve, and something different for those who fight, conquer, reign, etc.” (Guardini 1998b, 88). We can extend this to those who clean, care, produce, sell, advertise, suffer, endure illness, experience betrayal or abuse. He goes on to refer to the different perspectives caused by gender, age, intellectual capacity, social location and roles at work.

Admired by several Popes, including John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis, Guardini influenced deeply Hannah Arendt, Karl Rahner, Josef Pieper and Hans Urs von Balthasar. Robert Krieg describes Guardini as a forerunner of Vatican II, claiming that “he played a major role in leading Catholicism from Pius IX to John XXIII, from the knowing stance of the First Vatican Council to the listening stance of the Second Vatican Council” (Krieg 1997, 22). In an earlier work Krieg summarises the difference in tone and purpose between the First and Second Vatican Councils: “The church of Vatican I saw itself as a fortress or bastion of truth against the errors of the Enlightenment; in contrast, the church of Vatican II sees itself as a pilgrim people on its way, in dialogue with other peoples, to the reign of God” (Krieg 1995, 25), and he attributes a major part in this shift to Guardini.

For those Catholics who view Vatican II unfavourably, and who accept the assessment that Guardini can accurately be interpreted as a precursor of that Council, then Guardini might be considered to have contributed to the damage they believe was caused by it. For example, with regard to liturgical changes, his emphasis on the meal (rather than sacrifice) as being the essence of the Mass, will be a bone of contention for some. His flexibility and his avoidance of being easily classified make him vulnerable to accusations of vagueness, especially with regard to doctrine. His tendency to avoid using Thomist language and to be closer to the Augustinian tradition made him suspect for some readers, especially in the half-century between the crushing of modernism and the years of the Second Vatican Council, when Thomism prevailed as the normative form of describing and explaining the faith. He might also be accused (from different quarters) of being an impractical Romantic, of addressing only people who were highly educated, rather than ordinary people, and of being inattentive to developments outside Europe. In light of later technological developments that occurred after his death, he may seem insufficiently aware of the colonizing and unhealthy effects of these developments on human lives. And, although he was in favour of members of the Church engaging in dialogue with the modern world, many of his writings might come across today to readers outside of the Christian faith as conservative and exclusivist in their claims. Despite these potential shortcomings, as seen from various perspectives, Guardini represents a fertile example of how a person of his time, steeped in the Catholic faith, reached out to the people of his culture in a manner that bridged the gap that often opens up between life, faith and culture.

For the purposes of this article, among the many themes explored in his writings by Guardini, I shall attend to only four: his treatment of a Catholic worldview; the importance he attributed to liturgy in founding and shaping that worldview; belief in providence as a constitutive element within a Catholic worldview; and the cultural critique he brought to bear as a consequence of reading the world in the light of that worldview.

## 2.1. **Worldview**

To hold a worldview, according to Guardini, is a matter of seeing the totality of things and the character of the world that is given to us, perceiving its inner unity, able to contemplate it, to assess its value and relation to us, and taking up a stance toward the world (Guardini 2019, 32–33). Having a worldview goes beyond the possession of knowledge to include accepting that one has a task to accomplish in response to this world (Guardini 2019, 40). He believed that both the world within a person and the world that surrounds that person come from God. “The task of human beings is to walk towards God and to take the world with them” (Guardini 2019, 46). A proper appreciation of and response to the world requires from us both distance – in order to maintain perspective on it and also a degree of liberty from it – and a love that is open to all being (Guardini 2019, 51). To embrace a Catholic worldview means taking seriously divine revelation in all its content and in all its implications for how we live (Guardini 2019, 68). That, in turn, calls believers to accept their need to live their lives nurtured and guided by the Church, which is the historic depository of how Christ sees the world. Life within the Church, with all its dimensions such as dogma and liturgy, has implications for what we can come to know and how we should think and act (Guardini 2019, 71).

In addition to learning from a Catholic worldview, Guardini also advised his audiences to be willing to learn from today’s world (despite its defects) – because God is its Creator, the source of all truth, beauty and goodness, and because God both loves the world God has created and, through his Holy Spirit, is active within it. Catholics are therefore called to engage with the culture around them, not to shun it, but nor are they to allow themselves to be colonized by it. That engagement has to be discerning, appreciative yet also critical.

## 2.2. **Liturgy**

The foundation for an authentic way of life is given in the liturgy, according to Guardini. We begin with what is given by Christ and continued in the liturgy. To become immersed in the liturgy shapes our outlook and our desires and it orients us towards a Christlike mode of reading and responding to the world. In order to live charitably in the world we must first embrace the identity given to us in the Eucharist. For Guardini there is a direct link between the proper celebration of liturgy and the authentic renewal of culture.

Among the strengths of the liturgy, for Guardini, are its corporeal and communal dimensions: it deploys the body through various liturgical gestures and it bonds us into a community and thus releases us from the insistent individualism which is a feature of contemporary culture. In place of the constant busyness and shallow self-expression of much of modern life, the liturgy promotes stillness, reservedness



and reposefulness (Guardini 1998c, 14). Yet this does not constitute an escape from caring for and exercising responsibility within the world; rather what happens in the liturgy is meant to be connected to and carried forward into the “problems and tasks of public and family life, and with those of Christian charity and of vocational occupations” (Guardini 1998c, 19). Another strength is the way, across its various seasons throughout the year, the liturgy “embraces, as far as possible, the whole of Divine teaching,” (Guardini 1998c, 24) in contrast to partial and incomplete readings of that teaching. With Christ at the heart of its focus and the Holy Spirit as its animating force, the liturgy incorporates us into Christ, and gives us a share in the divine life. The cost of opening ourselves up to these benefits is the renunciation of self-determinism and of spiritual isolation; we humbly submit to the body being built up in liturgical celebration, rather than going our own way. As Guardini puts it, “the liturgy is a school of religious training and development to the Catholic who rightly understands it [and also of] cultural formation” (Guardini 1998c, 47).

It achieves this because it puts worship first, an acknowledgement of our dependency on our Creator, and because it addresses our deepest needs, which go far beyond the desire for material satisfaction as promised by the prevailing mechanized worldview and technocratic mentality. Liturgy, for Guardini, is the context in which we discover the true freedom granted by living in conformity with our God-given nature. It connects us to ultimate and life-giving truth. As Roland Millare explains, “Adoration is a concrete recognition on the part of the human person that he is not self-sufficient or autonomous. Adoration is a humble act that recognizes God as the source of all existence” (Millare 2020, 530). Only when we are in right relationship with God can all our other relationships become properly ordered and sustained.

### 2.3. Providence

Jane Lee-Barker argues that providence is a pervading theme running through all of Guardini’s writings. Divine Providence is “that order which exists between God and those who give themselves to him in true faith. To the extent that man recognises God as his Father, that he places his trust in him and makes the kingdom the primary concern of his heart, to precisely that extent, a new order of being unfolds about him, one in which ‘for those who love God all things work together unto good’ (Rom. 8:28)” (Lee-Barker 2022, 131–32, quoting Guardini).

Building on Matt 6:25–34, calling us to trust in God’s care for each of us, Guardini, while endorsing the need to trust that God is present to us and caring for us at each moment of our lives, does not imply mere passivity on the part of God’s people. Rather he suggests that we open ourselves to God’s grace so that we can cooperate with this in acting with initiative and responsibility in the world. As Lee-Barker says, “in God’s created and very sacred world, people are given the opportunity for discernment, decision, and action in relationship with God who guides but does not

force, coerce, or thrust ‘fate’ upon them” (Lee-Barker 2022, xiii). A little further on, she continues, “Providence in Guardini’s view is not a finished act or plan which God imposes on the world. Being open-ended it allows for the possibility of human involvement in its completion. ... One must be transformed by the grace of God in order to contribute to a transformed world” (Lee-Barker 2022, 5).

Thus providence is not only a gift and help to us but also a task and a demand, a call to display a Godly care for creation. But that is only possible if we are truly participating in the life of God, mediated to us through the Church, receiving the sacraments, intentionally developing a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and actively opening oneself to the work of the Holy Spirit. As Lee-Barker describes Guardini’s teaching on providence, “Providence ... is the process of a person, becoming redeemed, in a world also in the process of being redeemed. The human person can contribute to this process by allowing God to be active in his or her life, making the person more Godly and enabling the person to be a door for God in the world. Guardini will argue that Godly people can help the world to be a Godly world” (Lee-Barker 2022, 95). The possibility and privilege of each person having the capacity to act as a door through which God can enter the world is a motif that recurs several times in Guardini (Lee-Barker 2022, 12, 22, 87).

One further point might be made here about Guardini’s teaching on providence. This is that an appreciation of providence emerges from, relies upon and has implications for communal life. There are two aspects here. First, a person only learns how to understand God’s purposes in the context of community – with that community itself being informed by the liturgy. Second, the faith that is supported by a strong sense of providence calls not only for a vibrant personal relationship between believers and God, but also requires that they involve themselves, insofar as it lies in their capacity, in the right ordering and developing of the world.

## 2.4. Cultural Critique and Technocratic Mentality

Once one has appreciated Guardini’s take on what is entailed in possessing a Catholic worldview, the centrality of the liturgy in shaping and orienting that worldview, and his emphasis on providence, it follows that one recognizes how the ethos of modern culture is governed by an entirely different set of values, purposes and priorities. Whereas “The *ethos* of modern culture is governed by a mechanistic and utilitarian *logos*, the *ethos* of an authentic Christian culture is underpinned by a Eucharistic *logos* oriented towards self-giving love” (Millare 2016, 974). For Guardini, “The technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given,’ as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape” (Guardini 1998a, 55). He urges that Christians turn from the *logos* of *techne* to the *logos* of the liturgy. In his view, a culture which prioritises *techne* is one that is concerned with the exercise of power and domination; it is means-oriented, without

adequate attention to the ends being pursued; it lacks ethical depth; in its focus on what technology makes possible, it is so present-oriented that it neglects the wisdom of historical traditions; it limits itself to an anthropocentric and immanent perspective and it fails to be open to the transcendent or to revelation (Sullivan 2021b). As Millare observes, “Another name for this separation of culture from revelation is secularization” (Millare 2016, 976).

A purely secular society, one which is not illuminated by revelation, in Guardini’s view, misreads human nature, with serious consequences. It assumes that material needs are preeminent in human decision-making, while either neglecting or at least underestimating humanity’s spiritual needs and nature. As Tracey Rowland points out, “Guardini argued that advanced industrial society created false consumer needs that integrated individuals into a system of media-driven mass consumption” (Rowland 2021, 128). The bourgeois temperament that emerges in this context is “calculating, pragmatic, focused on efficiency and predictable outcomes. It discourages moral heroism as unreasonable. ... It both levels and narrows horizons” (Rowland 2021, 128).

Another manifestation of a secular landscape is the denial of the important role played by asceticism in granting men and women freedom from being controlled by their desires and passions and in freeing them for a higher form of life. Without the self-giving (and therefore, also, when necessary, self-sacrificing) love called for by Christian faith, humanity loses self-control.

Man has extensively mastered the immediate forces of nature, but he has not mastered the mediate forces because he has not yet brought under his control his own native powers. Man today has power over things, but ... he does not yet have power over his own power. ... Only the freedom won through self-mastery can address itself with earnestness and gravity to those decisions which will affect all reality. ... As long as men are unable to control themselves from within, they will inevitably be “organized” by forces from without (Guardini 1998a, 90, 93, 113n5).

On this point Guardini was to be echoed in a later generation by Ivan Illich, who also stressed the need for humanity to learn to live within limits and with self-restraint.

In Guardini’s critique of culture he also exposed two erroneous understandings of the human person. One was to overemphasize autonomy and to reduce people to isolated monads who failed to appreciate their inescapable interdependence. This was corrosive of an attitude of solidarity with other people. Liberal capitalism was particularly prone to this misreading of our nature, encouraging a selfish and even ruthless competition for goods while neglecting the common good. The alternative extreme, preferred by both communist and fascist collectivism, led to “mass man”, subordinated and sacrificed individuals to the needs of the party or the state, and failed to preserve a space for the uniqueness, mystery and essential incommunicability of

each person. A liturgically shaped outlook, as advocated by Guardini, would allow for a better balance between individual dignity and freedom on the one hand, and, on the other hand, commitment to the common good.

Although Guardini died before some of the most recent developments in technology had surfaced, he had exposed the direction of travel, sounded alarm bells and proposed a path towards a more humane and healthy alternative. His insights have been taken up by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* and in *Laudato Si*, as has been noted by Massimo Borghesi (Borghesi 2018, 103, 105, 138, 139). Guardini's project of addressing contemporary culture from a Catholic worldview was to be taken up in the final third of the twentieth century and into the beginning of the twenty-first century, although in ways that sound strikingly different.

### 3. Ivan Illich

In many respects, Ivan Illich seems surprisingly similar to Guardini with regard to the importance he attributes to the church, liturgy, personal responsibility, cultural critique and historical perspective. Yet he also comes across as displaying strikingly different emphases on each of these and adopting a radically different tone of voice. He was an eclectic and idiosyncratic thinker, who stood outside current terms of debate and therefore saw issues afresh, opening up new possibilities. He took pains to attend to and redefine the categories within which our conversations usually take place. Disconcerting in his exposure of many prevailing assumptions and discomfiting in the starkness, scope and radical nature of his arguments, he could be scathing and satirical, but also poetic and prophetic. Scholastic and erudite, often aphoristic in style and offering a kaleidoscope of images and metaphors to jolt his readers and audiences into fresh perspectives, Illich could be described as an ascetic anarchist, a restrained revolutionary, simultaneously humble yet bold, reticent yet given to sweeping assertions.

He was a controversial figure for a number of reasons: his readiness to critique the institutional church, a stance that – when he began to do this – seemed to put him beyond the pale; his frequent scathing language about viewpoints he castigated; his tendency to offer sweeping generalisations and to pontificate about professions about which he had only a relatively superficial knowledge; his inclination to view medieval Christianity too benignly as an ideal expression of faith; and his image in his later years as a jet-setting and deliberately provocative intellectual celebrity. Despite all this, Illich does exemplify how Catholics can, drawing upon their faith and its intellectual and spiritual traditions, engage with their culture in a manner that is challenging, fertile and with something pertinent to say to many aspects of secular life.

For Illich, what is important is poverty, powerlessness, spontaneity and freedom in exercising initiative. Rather than planning or control, he stressed the need for openness to the surprising and what comes to us as gratuitous. He deployed historical perspective to provide a necessary and essential vantage point from which to help us gain some degree of distance from our current assumptions and concerns, our ways of thinking and acting in which we are so submerged that we are often imprisoned by them. He was both radical and conservative, orthodox yet also iconoclastic. His understanding and expression of faith was seen by some as subversive of many church policies.

He was influenced by Hans Urs von Balthasar, Erich Przywara, Romano Guardini, Jean Daniélou and particularly by Jacques Maritain. Among other influential figures, he was close to Archbishop Helder Camara and Erich Fromm. He taught in several German universities and also in several American ones. Alert to contemporary cultural developments and interpreting these in light of Christian tradition, he addressed a wide range of audiences and readers: architects, educators, policy makers, medical personnel, Lutheran bishops, economists and many others. Although his sensitivity to the issues facing these different groups was remarkable, it was inevitable that in some cases his grasp of the specificities and detail in each case could sometimes be rather broad-brush and possibly lacking in depth of penetration. Intending to be a gadfly, exposing assumptions with a view to provoking fresh thinking, he wanted to undertake an archaeology of modern “certainties,” those ideas and feelings that seem too obvious and too “natural” ever to be put into question; and he had come to see the twelfth century as one of the great seedtimes of these certainties (Illich and Cayley 2005, 19). Among such certainties he considered that contemporary ideas of conscience, citizenship, technology, text, individuality, and marriage all began to emerge in that era. “Certainties are those things that we can’t think *about* because they are what we think *with* – they are what lie, Illich says, ‘beyond the horizon of our attention’” (Illich and Cayley 2005, 19; Cayley 2021, 13, 21).

After initial and highly successful pastoral work, especially with a Puerto Rican community in New York, in 1956 Illich had been recommended by Cardinal Spellman for the post of vice-Rector of the University of Puerto Rico, after which he went on to be Director of a Centre for Intercultural Formation in Cuernavaca from 1960–1967. This Centre was “an experimental micro-cosmos with powerful transformative characters in interaction with a very conservative Mexican Catholic hierarchy associated with the powerful” (Bruno-Jofré and Igelmo Zaldívar 2022, 47). The tensions arising between the conservative expectations of church leaders and Illich’s own creative and prophetic thinking led him eventually to remove himself as an official spokesperson for the church in order to give himself the freedom to forge ahead with his own vision of a radical role for the Christian in the world. This vision led him not only to call into question the comfortable assumptions held by many in the Church (assumptions that made them complicit in a colonialist and paternalistic mentality), but also to offer a reading of trends in the secular world that needed to

be resisted. Colin Miller claims that “One of Illich’s great contributions is to give a non-Marxist account of the relation between our material culture and our intellectual habits” (Miller 2017, 91). However, despite the fact that a glance at Illich’s many publications after he had left the service of the church may seem to justify describing him as a social critic, one who wrote from a rather idiosyncratic historical perspective, his close friend and collaborator, Lee Hoinacki, suggests that, rather than be considered as a social critic, philosopher or historian, Illich should be understood instead as an apophatic theologian (Hoinacki 2003, 382–89). This theology running through and underpinning the whole corpus of his writings might be implicit, rather than spelled out, but it was never absent.

Because of his early formation in scholastic theology and then his particular interest in the work of Hugh of St Victor (Illich 1993) – and twelfth century life and thought more generally – a marked feature of Illich’s writing and lectures was the historical perspective he brought to bear on twentieth century practices, institutions and assumptions. He sought distance from the present to enable him to see it with a mind strongly informed by and familiar with quite different ways of living and thinking. “I plead for a historical perspective on precisely those assumptions that are accepted as verities or ‘practical certainties’ as long as their sociogenesis remains unexamined” (Illich 1992, 9). Elsewhere he explained his use of history: “I study history to become sensitive to those modern assumptions which, by going unexamined, have turned into our epoch-specific, *a priori* forms of perception” (Cayley 2021, 291). His purpose was to loosen the grip of what is normally taken for granted and to open up the possibility of imagining a different future.

In what follows I will focus on four themes from Illich’s writings and lectures. The first of these is his sense of the church. Under this heading I will refer to his comments on mission, renunciation of power and on tradition as a source for renewal. Then I attend to his cultural critique of leading professions and their implicit curriculum, by using the example of schooling as promoting an unhealthy dependency. His criticisms of schooling were intended to show the need to promote self-sufficiency, initiative and personal responsibility among learners. Third, Illich developed an unusual and original theory that modernity can be seen as the perversion of Christianity, with modern institutions and professions operating as replacements and distortions of church and ministry. Finally, I draw attention to his desire to model and be an advocate for friendship as a counter to the negativity and damage caused by contemporary culture, envisaging friendship as a matrix for mutual and authentic learning and for healing the world.

### 3.1. The Church

Although Illich was always a devout Catholic, fully subscribed to church doctrine and moral teaching, loved the liturgy and read the world in the light of revelation and

the formation in faith he had received in his childhood, his youth and in the seminary, his relationship with some of the institutional aspects of the church was not always smooth. He was critical of the church as an institution, its bureaucracy, its political role in Latin America, the seminaries, and the role of the priests and of celibacy. (Bruno-Jofré and Igelmo Zaldívar 2022, xvi; Bruno-Jofré and Zaldívar 2016, 568–86). Although not involved in social action or in liberation theology, he did have a great interest in – and made significant contributions to – the pastoral preparation of religious and lay people (Bruno-Jofré and Igelmo Zaldívar 2022, 59, 62). However, he came to believe that, as an institution, the Church, in some of its stances, actually operated in a way that undermined the Gospel. Therefore, in 1969 he resigned from church service and renounced his priestly titles, benefits and privileges, left ecclesiastical structures and roles, yet never left the church.

For him, whether in his time working for the church or in the secular world, the church should act as a leaven which penetrates and lifts up the world with which it engages. “To separate the leaven from the flour means uselessness for both. If Catholics ever lose their concern for those who do not have God, they lose also their charity” (Illich 2018, 11). If his earlier years were spent in pastoral service and the final three decades of his life were committed to a more prophetic role, in both cases one can claim that he acted as a leaven, mingling with, reaching out to, immersing himself in diverse groups of people in multiple contexts, always seeking to give himself away to them and thereby enhancing their activities.

This chimes with how he described the role of the missionary in 1961: “The missionary is he who leaves his own to bring the Gospel to those who are not his own, thus becoming one of them while at the same time continuing to be what he is” (Illich 2018, 51). “Mission ... requires an ability to bracket and relativize one’s own culture in order to hear what the Gospel says when it speaks in the voice of another culture” (Illich and Cayley 2005, 20). This willingness to let go of one’s own inheritance and to be open to the perceptions and needs of those one hopes to serve was a manifestation of spiritual poverty, “willingness to be without what we like” (Illich 2018, 53). “Just as spiritual poverty implies not the absence of likes, but freedom from them; so the attitude of the missionary carries him not to the denial of his background but to communication with that of another” (Illich 2018, 53). Without such spiritual poverty, he believed that missionaries were in danger of unwittingly importing a foreign culture, an alien Gospel, a misguided pastoral approach, all of which functioned as favouring an unhealthy western capitalism (to which the church was only too accommodating). Not only that, but the drive to send thousands of missionaries from North America and Europe to South America ran the risk of obscuring the need for radical reforms in how the Church conducted herself.

If North America and Europe send enough priests to fill the vacant parishes, there is no need to consider laymen to fulfil most evangelical tasks; no need to re-examine the structure of

the parish, the function of the priest, the Sunday obligation and clerical sermon; no need for exploring the use of the married diaconate, new forms of celebration of the Word and Eucharist and intimate familial celebrations of conversion to the Gospel in the milieu of the home (Illich 2018, 95).

Rather than the temptation to hold onto power and privilege, for Illich the Church needed to accept that the renunciation of power is a precondition of love and a necessary corollary of accepting the Cross as the sign of the Christian. He warned that “The Church’s community-creating functions break down when supported by symbols whose driving force lies in an authority structure” (Illich 2018, 111).

Despite his urging the Church to be ready to renounce power and privilege, Illich had a nuanced appreciation for the role of tradition and how Christians should be ready both to embrace and deploy this, as well as to discern when to either sit loosely to it or to dare to develop it in new directions. On the one hand, sharing in “the sense of the Church” occurs when a person is “rooted in the living authority of the Church, lives the imaginative inventiveness of the faith, and expresses himself in terms of the gifts of the Spirit. This ‘sense’ is the result of reading the sources of authentic Christian tradition, of participation in the prayerful celebration of the liturgy, of a distinct way of life” (Illich 2018, 117). On the other hand, one must not turn the Church into an idol. This would be to abdicate personal responsibility. “Each Christian must struggle to establish and maintain a delicate balance between independence of the Church and dependence on the Church” (Illich 2018, 140). For Illich, tradition does not prevent or oppose change; rather it orients and anchors it. This is possible because “freedom to innovate and rootedness in tradition are different sides of the same coin. Without rootedness, innovation is promiscuous and unguided. ... Without the innovation, ... rootedness in tradition lapses into arid habit. ... Grounding without freedom is bondage, ungrounded freedom only permissiveness. ... [A] wholeness can only be sustained when the opposites that compose the whole are each given their due” (Cayley 2021, 464). Illich modelled a deliberately cultivated, careful and self-disciplined freedom within and for the Church at the same time as drawing from her the depth and enduring motivation of his life.

### **3.2. Education as Example of the Promotion of Unhealthy Dependency**

Illich controversially lambasted a range of modern professions and cultural trends. Among these he offered a searing critique of medicine. This is illustrated in the following quotation: “A professional and physician-based health care system which has grown beyond tolerable bounds is sickening for three reasons: it must produce clinical damages which outweigh its potential benefits; it cannot but obscure the political conditions which render society unhealthy; and it tends to expropriate the power of the individual to heal himself and to shape his or her environment” (Illich 1975, 11).



This sentence encapsulates claims that he also addressed to other aspects of modern life: something originally worthwhile and benevolent has grown unwieldy through exponential growth; the profession “managing” particular services holds a monopoly, thereby denying others an opportunity to contribute; there are damaging side-effects of the profession’s practices that are too easily ignored; the very need felt by the general public for the services of this profession prevent them from recognizing wider social conditions that should be addressed; and unwarranted dependence on these services encourages excessive passivity and undermines initiative and the development of a mature responsibility in the population.

Although Illich’s book on medicine stirred up lively arguments, it was his writings on education that really brought him fame and notoriety. Just as people put too much trust, he asserted, in the medical profession, so too they relied too much on institutions set up to provide education. In *Deschooling Society* and in other writings of the 1970s and 1980s, Illich was critical of how the nation-state had secured a monopoly of education through its schools. He exposed what he saw as a malign hidden curriculum that was being promoted in schools. He denounced one outcome of this state monopoly as leading to the conflation in people’s minds between schooling and the broader endeavour of education. “Work, leisure, politics, city living, and even family life, depend on schools for the habits and knowledge they presuppose, instead of becoming themselves the means of education” (Cayley 2021, 19). He shrewdly noted that most people acquire most of their learning outside of school, as a side-effect of their informal engagement in ordinary life activities and relationships.

“The child grows up in a world of things, surrounded by people who serve as models for skills and values. He finds peers who challenge him to argue, to compete, to cooperate, and to understand; and if the child is lucky, he is exposed to confrontation or criticism by an experienced elder who really cares. Things, models, peers, and elders are four resources for education” (Illich 1992, 98).

His critique of the education system was hard-hitting and, to many, it seemed unduly harsh. He claimed that “Education serves the dominant minority as a justification for the privilege they hold and claim” (Illich 1974, 85). In one lecture he went so far as to assert that “The school system is a worldwide soulshredder that junks the majority and hardens an elite to govern it” (Illich 1988, 2). He compared the certificates that pupils received at the end of schooling with those given out by those selling indulgences in the later Middle Ages, implying that both were meaningless and without value. Too many people acted as if they held a religious faith in the power of education to fit them for the world. “The first thing the child learns from the hidden curriculum of schooling is an age-old adage of faith corrupted by inquisition, – *extra scholam nulla est salus* – outside this rite, no salvation” (Illich 1974, 86).

At the heart of his critique of schooling was his concern for individual imagination and personal freedom, initiative, creativity and responsibility. Enforced instruction stifles the will to learn independently. “By making men abdicate the responsibility

for their own growth, school leads many to a kind of spiritual suicide” (Illich 1992, 80). His views here are an outgrowth of his concern that the Church, like schooling, fosters dependence, passivity, immaturity and a lack of authentic ownership of one’s own faith formation. In such cases, learning, whether sacred or secular, in the Church or in schools, fails to lead to a transformation of consciousness. He wanted to make *the expansion of freedom*, rather than the growth of services, the criterion of social progress; he hoped to “uncover and encourage the abilities, intuitions, and encounters that are smothered by the blanket of professional care” (Illich and Cayley 2005, 14, 38).

### 3.3. Modernity and the Perversion of Christianity

Some might claim that Christianity has been left behind by the gains of modernity and is now merely of historical interest. Perhaps it only ever constituted a stage in human development, and we have learned how to advance beyond Christianity’s superstitions, misogyny, indoctrination and restrictions on freedom. Its shortcomings have been exposed and we exist in a much more enlightened age. Others might claim that, although Christianity did pave the way for the emergence of modernity, we can now safely liberate ourselves from its metaphysical, mystical and ecclesiastical dimensions, while borrowing (selectively) from some of its moral teachings. Illich, however, argued that modernity is neither the fulfilment nor the antithesis of Christianity, but its *perversion*. Furthermore, he believed, this perversion of the faith has come about not through the evil machinations of people in modern times who misinterpreted and distorted what was once pure and authentic in the Church’s teaching and practice, but that the Church herself modelled the perversion and distortion, instead of exemplifying what should have been at the very heart of the Church’s life and *modus operandi*.

I have already pointed to Illich’s commitment to the Church and what he saw as central to her life: mission, renunciation of power and living tradition. The problem, as he saw it, was the misguided tendency – one which had been a constant temptation since the fourth century, when, in rapid succession, Christianity went from being proscribed and persecuted, to toleration (in 313AD), and then to being prescribed as the official religion of the Roman Empire (in 383AD) – to try to preserve, guarantee and enforce the faith, to circumscribe its teachings and life with regulations and power. When this happens, the Gospel has been corrupted and what should be the best becomes the worst. “I can’t do without tradition, but I have to recognize that its institutionalization is the root of an evil” (Illich and Cayley 2005, xv).

Illich distinguished two forms of the Church – as *she* and as *it*. The first is “the living embodiment of Christian community” while the second is “a self-serving, worldly power” (Illich and Cayley 2005, 4). And, acting as a self-serving power, the Church was always tempted to adopt the methods and tools of other worldly

powers. In doing so, she betrayed the very Gospel she was meant to serve and demonstrated that she did not fully believe in or trust this Gospel or the Holy Spirit to bring about God's will. This betrayal, and the ensuing perversion of the faith, not only began with the Church, but spread to later institutions, agencies and professions. Thus, he claimed, "It was the Church that first gave its clerisy legal jurisdiction over souls and made the faithful dependent on clerical services. It was the Church that made learning a consequence of authoritative teaching, that made standing in the faith a result of correct answers to catechisms and inquisitions, and that made salvation a question of compulsory attendance at various rituals" (Illich and Cayley 2005, 12).

At the heart of Christian faith lies the freedom to accept God's invitation to share in his life, as taught by Jesus. The use of force, whether hard or soft power, is corrosive of the free response of the human spirit to the Holy Spirit. For Illich, the Church, which he loved, also exasperated him by the tendency to use compulsion, to confuse conformity with true commitment, and by the abuse of authority. "The Church identified salvation with attendance at services, submission to prescribed rituals, and obedience to Church rules" (Cayley 2021, 386). As a result, Illich noted, the Church "contains the Gospel in both senses of the term – it preserves and protects it, but it also holds it in, containing its power and shielding society from its effect" (Cayley 2021, 391–92). In his wide-ranging critique of the institutions, agencies and professions of modernity, Illich claimed that his contemporaries were practicing a perverted and degenerated form of Christianity; they did so because they participated in institutions that had learned only too well from the Church's example and which still bore the church's genetic imprint.

### 3.4. Friendship

In contrast to his prophetic and critical commentary on the Church and on modern institutions and professions, Illich showed a softer and more pastoral side when he both spoke about and demonstrated in his own life the enduring benefits and potential of friendships. Friendship offers each of us a mode of belonging quite different from that of the family or the nation, more expansive and liberating than the former and less fraught with the power to swallow up our individuality than the latter. "For me friendship has been the source, condition, and context for the possible coming about of commitment and like-mindedness" (Illich and Cayley 2005, 147). In response to the question: how can one live gratuitously in a world like this? Illich simply and succinctly replies: "Friends" (Illich and Cayley 2005, 228). It is clear from many of his comments that Illich had a deep appreciation of the potential of friendship to open up paths towards more humane ways of living. Friendship requires and calls forth attention, responsiveness, celebration, renunciation and self-limitation, presence, fidelity, self-discovery; it generates community (Sullivan 2023).

For Illich, the effective and winsome communication of faith depends on it emerging from a communitarian and fraternal mode of living. Compulsion and speaking from a position of power stifle the human spirit and obscure openness to the working of the Holy Spirit. Even the search for truth, he believed, presupposes an ambience of friendship rather than a lonely and insistent individualism, however dogged and persistent this may be. Deeply committed human bonds are needed to sustain a common investigation into the issues facing humanity. “The vocation by which I try to live today I would call that of a friend rather than the prophet. ... This is the way in which hope for a new society can spread. And the practice of [friendship] is not really through words but through little acts of foolish renunciation” (Illich and Cayley 2005, 170).

## Conclusion

Both Guardini and Illich offer resources for contemporary Christians to draw upon in responding to a secularizing landscape. If both provided a critique of contemporary culture and the forces that threaten to destroy our humanity, each gave emphasis to different aspects of a remedy. Guardini stressed the need to develop a Catholic worldview, to draw life and orientation from the liturgy, and to trust in providence. Illich not only highlighted the vital importance of mission, renunciation of power, and tradition as a source for renewal, but he challenged the Church to recognize her own contribution to the distortions of modernity and to look to friendship rather than control as a counter to the defects of contemporary culture.

Thinking and speaking about God and God’s relation to us cannot be restricted to church settings. In order to speak with credibility and confidence of God in multiple contexts, Christian theologians need to be learning from and contributing to dialogue with people from many different disciplines. One of the reasons that both Guardini and Illich exerted such influence – and showed the way for others to do so today – is that, building on the foundation it had given them, they took their Catholic faith out into the world, beyond the borders of the Church and engaged with discernment the culture of their time. Can the Church offer an alternative today to the state, the university, the media, the market and to technological progress when it comes to giving people inspiration and guidance for why and how to live?

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