



New York Cultural Center

**A CHRISTIAN NATION?
THE AMERICAN ANOMALY IN THE AGE OF
RELATIVISM AND SECULARIZATION**

Speakers: Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete—Theologian, author, columnist
Mr. Paul Elie— Author, senior editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux
Fr. Jacek Buda, O.P.— Catholic Campus Minister at Columbia Univ.

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**transcript not reviewed by the speakers*

Introduction

Joseph Wiener: Good evening. I would like to welcome all of you on behalf of Crossroads New York Cultural Center.

Tonight's discussion is the first event in our Spring 2006 series. You can find the complete program on your chair and more information is available at the table outside.

Tonight, we have invited two distinguished guests to help us take a critical look at a theme that has been so widely discussed in the last few years that it has almost become a cliché. Countless commentators have pointed out that America is unique among advanced democratic countries because of the role religion plays in our culture. Whereas a large swath of formerly Christian Europe has been swept by the seemingly irresistible wave of secularization, the US appears to buck the trend in terms of both widespread religious allegiance, Church attendance, Christian political influence etc. Like every stereotype, this latest incarnation of the venerable tradition of American exceptionalism certainly reflects something real, but also neglects other aspects. The goal of tonight's discussion is to understand better the uniqueness of the American religion experience, and to what extent it may be really able to protect our culture from the powerful nihilistic currents that run through so much of today's Western world. I should mention that a serious illness in his family has

prevented Prof. Joe Weiler of the NYU School of Law from joining our panel tonight.

Prof. Weiler has authored an important book on the controversy surrounding the European Constitution and the Christian roots of Europe. We hope to have him join another panel in the near future. Now, to introduce our guests, I leave the microphone to Fr. Jacek Buda of the Columbia Campus Ministry, who has kindly accepted to act as moderator for tonight's discussion.

Fr. Jacek Buda: I would like to welcome everyone here. We have an international group tonight and an international topic for discussion, and internationally renowned guests to talk about it: Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, who's been everywhere around the world and who is—

Albacete: ...running away....

Buda: And who is running away around the world, and who's been a very, very keen observer of culture in Europe and in America for many years. You can read his books and his articles in many important newspapers. Among them is *The New York Times*, and also Catholic newspapers, if you would like to read them. Right now in New York he's teaching in the New York seminary, and also is involved with the community of Communion and Liberation, a movement that is kind of making its first steps in America.

On the other hand, I have Mr. Paul Elie. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Elie, before meeting him in person, in his book *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* about major American Catholic writers.

Let's start our discussion: America, a Christian nation? Just to start I would like to say a couple personal maybe confessions, maybe memories about American Christianity. As you can hear, I'm not American. I came across the ocean six years ago, but I realized that the experience that I had was not unique at all. What kind of experience was that? Obviously, growing up in Europe, in Poland, one of the top Catholic countries of the world – at least that's the common belief, at least that's the way the Poles like to look at themselves – we presume, watching Hollywood and reading newspapers, that America is pretty much like every other pop cultural country, with kind of a blind, very distant attitude towards religion. And then I started reading books. I had American professors, and they gave me Tocqueville to read and I realized, okay, this man was very optimistic, he was a Frenchman who traveled in the difficult times for Europe,

and was shocked by the religious experience of America. Then I came to America myself and I realized this strange phenomenon which for Americans might be difficult to detect, but for Europeans is what you feel the very first second that you land on American soil: Religion is part of public life. It's sometimes a very strange kind of religion, sometimes it's difficult for us to recognize, but it's definitely religion, something that you can do, something that you can present in public. Being a priest in New York for the last six years, I realized that I thought that many things that I would consider in Europe as clericalism, are simply a sign of respect from American people just because I am a priest. They are not necessarily Catholics, not necessarily Christian, they just consider religion and religious persons part of society, which is not necessarily the case in Europe. Why does that happen and how did that happen? I don't know. I would like to understand myself. That's why I'll ask our guests maybe to share with us their thoughts. Msgr. Lorenzo?

Albacete: I don't know anything about anything, so these are really just little musings, little points. After all, I'm from Puerto Rico. I don't know what we are either. I don't know, I'm having trouble understanding exactly what one means by "Christian nation." So I would say that the history of the United States as a nation is inseparable from the history of the Christian faith. That much, I think, cannot be contested. Whether that leads one to say "a Christian nation" or not is something else. But certainly the reality that put together and launched the history of this nation, part of that reality is certainly the Christian faith, and you can see this not only in the devotion to the hundreds of American Jesuses that are found all over the landscape, but even in the terms of which the nation conceives of its mission and its purpose, even in terms, for example, of however differently it is understood, in terms of the devotion to freedom and of a devotion to the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps the greatest example of the power of American Christianity that it has to formulate the life in this country is a cartoon in The New Yorker a few years ago in which it showed the Pilgrims coming to America, and one of them tells the other, "Yes, I am going for religious freedom, but also hope to get involved in real estate." And that, in so many ways, says it all. So, that's that.

But then you say, so is America ceasing to be influenced by the history of Christianity? I propose to you that it is not, because that which many Christians consider a threat to the Christian roots and faith of America is itself a creation of Christianity. This secularism, relativism, nihilism, whatever you want to call it, is a creation of Christianity. It comes from the Christian claims, and I would like to explore that subject tonight.

In a sense this is a continuation of a debate that began at this university some months ago, was it? when the Crossroads Cultural Center presented the book Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity and Islam, by the President of the Italian senate, Mr. Marcello Pera, an atheist, who was here for the presentation, and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger who could not be here because he now has another job. At that time, the subject was raised as to whether the cultural developments in the European world from a Christian view of things to, for lack of a better word.....; actually Mr. Pera and the Cardinal in his famous, now infamous perhaps, speech, called *The Dictators of a Relativism*, that that process has affected the history of American culture less than in Europe. And the question, therefore, is: if so (and I think it has) why is that? I'd like to address that question.

In this book, the question about the United States explicitly appears when Mr. Pera is wondering whether Europe could not do like in the United States, that is, create some kind of non-denominational civic religion that has common values and common ways of looking at life, and common priorities, and gives us an example – the United States. Cardinal Ratzinger's reply to that, he seems to respond to Pera's argument the following way: He quotes the book that Father has just mentioned, Democracy in America, to the effect that, and now I quote the Cardinal, "The unstable and fragmentary system of rules on which, to outward appearance, this American democracy is founded functioned because of the thriving Protestant-Christian faith, the Protestant-Christian inspired combination of religious and moral convictions in American society. Everyone assumed these convictions," says Cardinal Ratzinger, "as the obvious spiritual foundations, and these foundations, these convictions, defined this society from within and reinforced the corpus of its laws. In the United States," he says, "secularization is proceeding now at an accelerated pace, and the confluence of many different cultures disrupts this basic Christian consensus. However, there is a much clearer and more implicit sense in America than in Europe that the religious and moral foundations bequeathed by Christianity are greater than that of any single denomination. Europe, unlike America, is on a collision course with its own history." So, Cardinal Ratzinger acknowledges that though the process is taking place here, it is somehow at a slower pace, and the question arises: Why is this so?

Why is Europe, which has such an ancient Christian tradition, unable to acknowledge, for example, that it has it in preparation of its European constitution? Why cannot it create this spiritual and moral consensus

irrespective of membership in a specific faith community that will give public value to the fundamental concepts of Christianity?

The topic of why has many dimensions, many points of entry. A lot has been said about it recently, motivated by this so-called culture clash which many are experiencing. It has its political dimensions. It has come up, been prompted to discussion by the European/American split with respect to the war in Iraq and the challenges of terrorism. It certainly has its sociological dimension. It comes up in the discussions of globalization, massive immigration, and the ever-changing nature of the profile of American society. And it has its historical dimensions in terms of the development of the history of religion in the United States.

Cardinal Ratzinger says the historical basis of the situation can be understood this way: “American society {this is the key to his answer as to why this process has been slowed in the United States} was built for the most part by groups that had fled from the system of state churches in Europe, and they formed their religious bearings in free faith communities outside of the state church. It was the experience of these free churches that laid the foundation {he claims} of American society.”

I would like to expand on this point from a more precise theological perspective. The question is being discussed in terms of a process towards secularism, relativism, rationalism. What does it mean? What do these terms mean? I would use them to indicate an awareness of reality, an account of reality, without reference to a transcendent dimension which allows as the only method of inquiry into reality the method of the sciences, and which outside this area requires relativism in all other approaches to knowledge. This is what is emerging. This is what the process from the influence of the Christian faith to this situation is the process we are looking at. And the claim is that in the United States this is occurring, but at a slower pace. Why this is so, Cardinal Ratzinger says, has to do with the very origins of American Christianity in the so-called “free church” experience. That is to say, the experience of the church, the experience of Christian faith that is grassroots oriented, that is not tied to power. The tying to the church to power in Europe is one of the reasons, according to this view, why the process is accelerated there. In the United States this has not happened and therefore the process has been slower. But I maintain further, I agree with that point, that indeed the process itself has its origin in the Christian faith. The process itself is logical given what I would call a certain distortion or derailment of Christianity. This rationalism, secularism, is itself a

decayed form of the Christian faith. It is created by a Christian faith that has lost something. What?

In order to make my point, I would like to summarize this process following the work of Msgr. Luigi Giussani by listing five developments, five “withouts,” he calls them, that show the beginning of this process in the experience of the Church, the faith, and how it leads to this present situation, or at least the possible situation of rationalism and secularism. These are five, five developments within Christian experience. My point is that secularism is the fruit of something that happened to Christian experience. So that in that sense, is America a Christian nation? A nation means being affected by what happened to the Christian faith, then America certainly fulfills it. Not just at both ends, not only in its origin, as in Protestant Christianity of the free churches, but even at the end if it were to become secularized because that secularization would be a product of Christianity itself.

These are the five “withouts” now: First, the separation of God from Christ. God without Christ. What does that mean? A fundamental Christian claim is “God through Christ.” God is “known,” is grasped, only because in Jesus Christ this mystery otherwise ungraspable becomes a tangible, visible, concrete human reality, so that we have an experience of this mystery that is a human experience. In passing I would say so many of the efforts of the Catholic Church from the Second Vatican Council till today, are understood in terms of trying somehow, trying somewhat, to revive this experience among Catholics. That is to say, to join again what was split, God and Christ. For example, at the end of the Second Vatican Council, the famous declaration that Pope John Paul II made practically the banner of almost everything he wrote, where it says, “Only in the mystery of Christ is the mystery of what it means to be human fully disclosed.” Also, at the end of the Council, Paul VI saying that the Church was now prepared to show Christianity as a human experience; that is to say, an experience of what it means to be human. All of this, up until today in the efforts of the present Pope and the remarks in his book show that the original problem, at least theologically speaking, from the perspective of Catholic theology, has to do with the relation between God and Christ. This is the original break. This is the detachment from which everything else follows. It is a loss in the sense of what an incarnation means. After all, Christianity stands or falls with the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Mystery that one calls God becoming flesh, becoming an earthly, human reality. This step separates the two. What could have brought this about? Why is there a loss in the experience of living in a world where Incarnation has taken place? We’ll see.

Once this break occurs, you have the second “without,” and that is the experience of Christ without the Church. The separation between God and Christ, Christ and God, leads to the separation between Jesus Christ and the Church. As a result, Jesus Christ becomes a figure that is not a human reality that is contemporary to us. He becomes a figure from the past or from above, if you wish, to be known by some kind of spirit induced vision or conviction. But Jesus Christ has escaped from the experience of life in this world. There is no way to verify the Christian faith anymore because, again, Christ has gone beyond. There is no way to verify the contemporaneity of Christ, that is to say, that this reality is something present today as much as it was 2000 years ago. There’s no way to verify, you just either believe it, or feel it, and are inspired by it, but in this world there is no evidence for you. The Church offered itself as evidence, and you in turn could look at it and arrive at the conclusion, yes or no, but at least you were looking at a contemporary evidence. Once Christ is separated from the Church then there is no evidence in this world that you can use to verify the claims.

What happens to the Church when this happens is the third “without” – the Church loses the experience of its presence in the world, as a reality of the world – the Church without the world. God without Christ, Christ without Church, Church without world. The Church without the world, the Church where Christ has been removed from it, the Church that is not to be used to verify the claims of Christianity, exists only by two powers: One is a kind of spiritualism. It exists as a reality that detaches faith from experience, privatizes it into some kind of interior, emotional experience, sentimentalizes the faith. That’s one possibility. A doctrine like the resurrection with its implications of what it means to live in this world has no way of being verified, so what power does it have? Whatever interior power it can exercise in your spiritual life. Another possibility, the opposite of this, but having the same origin is clericalism. That is to say how the Church sustains itself by codifying itself in a kind of literary fundamentalism or legalism or moralism. In all of this there is a power that calls the shots, that interprets what is or is not compatible with the Christian faith since it cannot be verified at all. Such a church either its spiritual version, a spiritualized church, cannot be a protagonist in history, cannot generate a culture. It has to be what Fr. Giussani calls a courtesan of cultural, political and social history. Where real life takes place the Church just goes along, trying to hang in there and make sure it doesn’t disappear by just the influence it can provide.

Once it happens, you move to the fourth “without” – and that is, having God and Christ been removed, having Christ been spiritualized away, having the Church been privatized away, the world is left without the sense of personhood. – World without I . Perhaps the step from one, two, three to four is the most difficult one to grasp. But it is there. You can see it in an historical development. The sense of the uniqueness and unrepeatability of what it means to be a person, and that this is lived to concrete and real relationships - the sense of this is lost; it is at least weakened. To the degree that the sense of personhood is a weakened one, exposes the culture to all kinds of manipulations by power. A power felt external to us rules, leading to a kind of internal alienation, to construct little, self-defensive worlds.

Finally, living in a world without I leads to the fifth “without”- the I without God, that is to say, the radical secularism, the loss of hope and trust in the goodness of reality and of life. The need for religion remains and so it creates all kinds of pantheistic spiritualizations all designed to lose the experience of the burden of being a person. A kind of not caring takes place. I have had people, more than one, ask me, “Why should I care about the pursuit of happiness? Why should I want to be free? Just settle for what we can.” Four and Five describe the situation in some places, the possible future in others. But they all come from number one. They all come from a culture that was generated by belief in an incarnation which suddenly or gradually for some reason lost that conviction.

To me, relativism and secularism are consequences of the dis-incarnation of the Mystery. It is not really a return to pre-Christianity. It is post-Christianity. This is a post-Christian development because it rejects what is claimed to have taken place. In this six step process, is there a common situation, reality, I don’t know how to call it, a development that kind of summarizes it all, that feeds and sustains the process? I propose this: At the heart of this dramatic situation is the separation between faith and life. That is to say, what the Christian faith proclaims is no longer experienced as corresponding to real life. Real life is the life, what seems possible to fulfill those desires of the heart that move us and animate, and support us, sustain us. The loss of that experience is a loss of credibility and the problem is a loss of credibility of the Christian proposal about life. This lack of correspondence between the way the faith is proposed and lived and life as in experience, certainly dis-incarnates Christ, removes him from this world into another, into a non-verifiable other, and God, which remains now the Mystery, the reason for which one might want to live, becomes, again, totally invisible, totally ungraspable, and one gets tired of that

and quickly chooses something less to worship, creating idolatry – its modern form, ideology. Where faith and experience in life are united, this process is prevented from continuing, or it is, at the very least, slowed down.

I would like to finally apply this to the idea of the free churches. I believe this way of looking at things coincides with Cardinal Ratzinger's suggestions of the importance for American history that its dominant Christian faith was that of the free church, the grassroots, the independent faith community. In these, faith was not separated from life. Faith was an experience. It was more linked to life than in the official state churches, more official churches. You can see this in the public role they play for which they demanded protection and recognition. Precisely through a separation of church and state, the American view of this separation, Ratzinger says, had a motivation and configuration that could not be more different from the conflictual expression of church and state imposed by the French Revolution or the systems that followed it. "America, the state," he says, "was little more than a free space for different religious communities to congregate. It is a separation conceived positively as a means to allow religion to be itself, a religion that respects and protects its own living space distinctly from the state and its ordinances. Completely different from Europe, in America, the private sphere has an absolutely public character." Faith has a public character because it has not been separated from life. As long as this can last, the descent into radical relativism or secularism could be halted or slowed down. However, in order to sustain this union between faith and life, as we have seen, the reality of the Church is necessary.

The second "without" must be prevented – Christ without the Church. And this is where the weak point is to the American resistance to secularism. Given the Protestant nature of the dominant Christianity, the experience of the Church, the life of the Church, is weakened, and the way thus paved for the third "without" – to them, to the others. The key is not to separate faith from the experience of belonging to that communion called the Church. It is that reality that concretizes the presence of Christ as a fact, as an event that can and must be verified precisely by its correspondence to the needs of the human heart.

Therefore I believe that the experiences of the free churches and the Protestantism it generated cannot sustain the advance toward secularism, rationalism, nihilism, forever. It cannot prevent this dissolution of Protestant Christianity into the culture, as has already happened in the so-called mainstream Protestantism. Evangelicals who still have this experience of faith and life will not be able, by themselves, to halt this process because of their lack

of experience of the Church. It is, therefore, a moment of question for the Catholic Church. Within the Catholic Church the process began. Every effort has been made to reverse the Second Vatican Council. This Holy Father in a short time, he's been here one year, has specifically identified this as the problem and has devoted his task, made his contribution to see if within the Catholic Church there can be an awakening of the relation between faith and life and the Church. This is a task, faith in the Catholic Church. It is a task that will also lead to an invitation to non-believers precisely because faith, in not being separated from life, will not be separated from reason, and reason is what we have in common. The fact that this book is written by an atheist and by the man who is now the Pope shows what is possible. If the Christian, like the Pope, feels no opposition between faith and life, and is not afraid to meet the very children the Church has created in the ground of reason. Faith, the Pope says there, helps us guide and purify our reason, and still then within it can approach, with respect, anyone. And this, and only this, can create a consensus that will generate a new culture. Thank you.

Buda: And now, Mr. Paul Elie....

Elie: Thank you, Msgr. Albacete. I'm not as learned as Msgr. Albacete, or as comprehensive in my way of speaking. I'm going to enter into the topic with a couple of stories and then end somewhere that converges with what he said, and I hope that's the case.

My own consideration of the subject *A Christian Nation?* and whether the Christian nation is an anomaly or an exception I guess began in earnest when I began to write my book called The Life You Save May Be Your Own, the life stories of four Catholic writers, and it was conceived in a way as a book that was meant to step aside from the generalizations that were so common about American Catholicism; for example, the oft told story of Catholicism in this country in the 20th Century was that the Church was a church of immigrants who came over from the old country, looked out for each other, built this city, proved their patriotism by fighting for America in World War II, came back and got educated in the GI Bill, moved to the suburbs, prospered a little, and it all came together when Kennedy was elected.

Now there's some truth to a sketch of that kind, but for me it's not satisfying as history, and it's not satisfying as an account of actual religious lives. So my thought was, I'll look at four Catholic lives, and hope that my story comes up through the floor boards. And in the course of doing that, it emerged that these

people - Walker Percy, novelist and philosopher, Dorothy Day, foundress of the Catholic Worker, Thomas Merton, monk and author, and Flannery O'Connor, novelist of the South, were in their way what might be called Christian personally. And to me, the consideration of their work in light of the Gospel and vice-versa, made me grasp more than I might have earlier.

The fact of the Incarnation as a kind of judgment on social science, the Incarnation, God becoming man, essentially proposes to us that this is the proper scale of things, the scale of the human being. And my reading at least urges upon it a certain suspicion of attempts to aggregate, to think in collectives, whether it's the collectivism that leads to fascism or the collectivism that purports to understand American religious behaviorism through polls, and through church attendance, and through giving patterns, and all sorts of aggregate measures of what kind of religious people we are.

So having given that approach a kind of run in the book, I had an invitation from the *Atlantic Monthly* to write about the conclave, when it should occur. And we batted the idea back and forth, and we weren't clear what the story was, of course, but my conviction was that I would try to emphasize again the human character as stressed by the Incarnation rather than a lot of the ways of looking at the college of cardinals or the Church in aggregate that were going around. And I wrote an article essentially saying that the cardinals will choose the person of deepest and most profound character as they see him, and not care about what continent he's from or how old he is or anything else. But, of course, John Paul was still alive and vigorous.

So I went to Rome to write an article about the community of St. Egilio, one of the movements that have emerged in Rome, then in Italy, and in Europe. Some of them founded before World War II, but I think it's fair to say that their life has been substantially after the war; that's when they got going and started to distinguish themselves. The objective was to write about St. Egilio and offer to understand the movement because the movement is in some ways a response to the supposed secularism in Europe, in some ways are evidence that contradicts those generalizations, or in some sense they're a personal defiance of this "sociology as destiny" which says that Europe is secular and so be it. This is individual Christians saying, "We believe; we're going to do something about it."

But I had an article to write so I had to understand the nature of secular Europe in order to understand what the communities are about, what the movements are about. I was working in English so I probably didn't have the whole spread of good material, but I was surprised at how little I found that was of any use in trying to understand what had happened to bring these movements about. But the unavoidable fact was that they had really come about in force after the Second World War. And to me, the absence of the war in the secularization of Europe stood out. I mean, this is a world war fought in large part in Europe, and yet discussions of secular Europe didn't figure that into the mix in the degree that you'd expect, so I started working on the idea that, trying to figure out what had happened in Europe after the war. I'm an amateur in this in a sense, but the question had to be answered provisionally for the article.

It's worth remembering that in World War II you had alliances that defied generalizations about Catholic and Protestant or Christian and secular. You had supposedly Protestant England, and supposedly Catholic France on one side, supposedly Protestant Germany, supposedly Catholic Spain, and Italy switching sides, and the Vatican neutral, and you had I think by even the most charitable interpretation widespread failure of the churches to respond in a way that would lend them or enable them to retain a sort of credibility that Msgr. Albacete referred to. So, not wanting to make this a single bullet theory, even so, I thought, well, it was a huge loss of credibility for Christianity in Europe because of the war. Let's not forget it was the second war in 30 years. It couldn't have been an anomaly, or caught anyone by surprise. And the movements emerged in a way, trying to do Christianity and to do the Church without the aspects of the Church that had been rendered illegitimate and lacking in credibility by the experience of the war.

How does this compare to America? The situation in our country now doesn't seem to be anything like the situation of Europe at the end of 1945. Our country is robust, our physical structure is in tact, our churches are, by many measures, vigorous, the war that is being fought is not on our land, and on and on and on. But I concluded, again provisionally for the sake of this article, so far as American Catholicism grew out of European Catholicism, the Catholic Church in this country is very aware of any notion of exceptionalism. Theologically we're reminded that we're joined to the worldwide Church. Historically we share so many experiences with the Church elsewhere. So it's worth considering that if the Church had an abrupt loss of credibility in Europe 60 years ago that something similar could happen in this country.

Now let's not forget that the time between the wars in Europe, culturally at least, was thought to be a time of Catholic flowering such as had not been seen in a couple of centuries. You had the great Catholic novelists in England, you had the great Catholic novelists in France, you had a theological age in Germany such as had not been seen since the Reformation. Credible vigor in Christian life in Europe and then sudden collapse. Were those writers, those movements, that theology – were they late expressions of Christianity that were about to vanish? It has to be considered. It's baffling when you juxtapose the vigor of certain parts of Catholic experience in Europe in the 30s and 40s with what happened afterwards.

So then, with that in mind, turning back to our country and the Church here, I said to myself, well, maybe the people who are in my book are a late expression of American Catholicism in the way that people like Mauriac or Graham Green or Waugh were late expressions of European Catholicism. I don't like the conclusion, and I don't even altogether hold it, but it's important to entertain. With that in mind, it's impossible to ignore the fact that the Church in this country has had a crisis which had challenged its credibility in the way that the Church's credibility was challenged in Europe by the war. Now I'm not saying that the crisis with priests' sexual abuse is equal in scope to World War II, but what happened was that the ability of the Church to represent Christ and to make an argument in the way that Msgr. Giussani and Msgr. Albacete have suggested, met a real challenge, and I fear that it's possible and were going to look back on the age from 1965 to the year 2000 as an age in which American Catholicism was vigorous. In retrospect we'll say, look at the conflicts of that period over the role of women, over the Catholic Church's role as regards war and peace, as regards the treatment of the poor, as regards the role of the Church in politics, sexuality, homosexuality, abortion, even the role of religion in public life... We will see the time just passed, I fear, as a time when the conflicts were conflicts born of vigor and not of decline. You had a large and vigorous Catholic left, and a large and vigorous Catholic right who were able to go at it and hope for a real outcome.

All this is a way of saying that my journalist's look, I hope on a personal scale of religious history in Europe and in America, suggests that our history has much more in common with the history of Catholic Europe than commentators would like to admit. If you read George Weigel, whose book The Cube and the Cathedral was published around the time that I was writing this article, American religiosity is a stick that he uses to beat Christian Europe with, and it's a very curious kind of triumphalism that takes as evidence of triumph a

gallop poll, numbers of Catholics, prominence of certain figures in public life, the importance of the Church's voice in certain policy debates. I think that if we want to reckon seriously and answer the question of whether America is a Christian nation, when we look for evidence of that, the evidence of whether this is a Christian nation should be the evidence we find in our religious tradition and not in social science. Is this a country marked by its piety? Is this a country where the stranger is welcomed as Christ? Is this a country where goods are shared in common? Is this a country where, as one priest likes to put it, you find politicians running on the Sermon on the Mount, and actually living it? It's just a different standard of measure as to whether this is a Christian country or a secular one. At one point, the Church in this country was acclaimed for taking immigrants kids and introducing them to the mainstream of American life. Well, a priest that I know suggested, "Wait a minute! Isn't it the job of the Church to introduce people to the mainstream of the Gospel life?" And I think he's got a point.

All this is to say that I find very provocative the generalizations that the man who's now pope made in his debate with the head of the Italian senate. There is a danger that these generalizations lend the argument or lend the question a sense of importance but actually don't tell us very much. I'm not sure that I recognize in the people that I know in Europe the nihilism and despair and the lack of connection between religion and life that is said to be the norm there. In the same way, I'm not sure if I recognize in this country, in the supposed religious vigor of our culture, real religious values any more than in a country that has much lower poll numbers of people going to church. I don't mean to just be antinomian about this and to suggest that all generalizations are useless, I'm just urging a kind of caution as we think about the questions, and urging us to remember the scale of the gospel which tells us to reckon religious lives one at a time.