



## **Religious Awareness in Modern Man**

### **Notes from the Seminar on Christianity and Culture in the Works of Luigi Giussani**

**The Rise of Christianity and the Foundation of Western Culture  
Monday, April 16, 2007**

*by Luca Grillo*

**Simmonds:** Good evening, and welcome to our lecture on "The Rise of Christianity and the Foundation of Western Culture" organized by Crossroads New York Cultural Center and Columbia Campus Ministry. Tonight's lecture is the second in a series of four inspired by a seminal work of Msgr. Luigi Giussani's, titled *Religious Awareness in Modern Man*, which was first published in English a few years ago in the international theological magazine *Communio* and you can find now at the Crossroads table. In this article, Fr. Giussani offers a very lucid discussion on why some of the most important Christian words have become almost incomprehensible to modern culture.

He also traces the historical development that has led to our current situation, identifying the root of the problem in rationalism, the tendency of modern western culture to reduce the scope of reason to its most abstract faculties. This theme of the "reduction of reason" has been brought up recently by Benedict XVI in his monumental Regensburg address, in which he called upon western culture to again "broaden" reason, in order to overcome the current separation between faith and reason, faith and culture. The Regensburg speech was a major motivation for this lecture series, especially because the Pope's main concern did not get any coverage in the press and was very much obscured by the controversy about the nature of Islam.

In order to explore these important questions, Crossroads has invited Luca Grillo who is currently a doctoral candidate in Classics at Princeton University, but only a few years ago he was a student of the late Fr. Giussani himself at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan, Italy. There he completed two of Fr. Giussani's courses, and was granted degrees in literature and philosophy. Mr. Grillo later received his Masters degree in Classical and Medieval studies at the University of Minnesota. It is a pleasure to again welcome him here tonight.

**Grillo:** Thank you. Good evening. Thank you for being here again tonight. I'll make a couple of very short premises and then we can tackle the theme of today which is not less rich and interesting than the one we had last week.

First, I would like to briefly summarize what we said in the first lecture. The first lecture was talking about the birth of Christianity at the crossroads of Greek tradition and Jewish tradition,

and we could say that Christianity has a claim to constitute the fulfillment of the deepest Greek desire which is the desire that reason might encounter and know the ultimate mystery, the meaning of everything, and, on the other hand, the encounter with the Jewish culture and civilization which is characterized by the fact that these are the people that God chose, and these are the people that God chose to enter into history. I drew on the board what Fr. Giussani used to draw to explain this point to us. Imagine, in a big field, the human attempt to reach God. We could try different ways, and we were saying that the best way would be to rely upon our reason, the tool we've been given to discover and to explore reality. The best at this adventure were the Greeks. And thanks to people like Plato and Aristotle they moved pretty far; they discovered a lot about human beings, about reality, and about God. We could say that their attempt to reach the mystery was like moving up. On the other hand, a completely different method, but dealing with the same issues, is the one we find in Jewish history and tradition—God entered into history; God engaged Himself with some people and chose a precise people. We could represent this as not the human attempt from earth to reach God, but as the choice and decision of God to reach down. “X” would be the mystery. Christianity, historically, in terms of time and space, and in terms of mental categories, happens at the crossroads where these two cultures meet. This is, in a nutshell, the content of the previous lecture.

The lecture of today will talk about the rise of Christianity, so the nature and the characteristics of Christianity, and then Christianity in its effect and impact on western culture. So the lecture is naturally divided into two main parts.

I will start talking about three effects that characterized and still characterize Christianity as such. We might wonder, if Jesus was a Jew and all the disciples He chose were Jews, and Christianity was physically and also as mental categories born within Judaism, how is it that at a certain point there was a split? How is it that we, the followers of Jesus, the Christians, the followers of Jesus, are not necessarily Jewish? This is due to a slow development that we can trace in three main steps. The first, I would like to tell you the story—it's a story from the Acts of the Apostles. A young, zealous and educated Pharisee was talking with his old rabbi, an old, wise man, a member of the Sanhedrin, a member of the group of the ones who just a few years previous decided to participate and take part, with the Romans, in the execution of Jesus. And the young, zealous and intelligent guy was saying, “I feel very uneasy. There is something wrong going on here because I, a real Jew, in the name of Judaism I catch myself participating in the persecution of other Jews, and this I don't like. It's true they are followers of this Jesus; it's true they are heretics, but something makes me unsatisfied with this.” And the old man whose name is in the Acts of the Apostles and also other documents, Gamaliel, responded, and he said, “Leave them alone.” He was talking about the small community of Christians in Jerusalem. “Leave them alone, because there are two possibilities: Maybe it's all made up and maybe this new sect is a work of human hands. If that's the case, they'll die out. Don't even bother persecuting them; they'll finish. But, the second possibility, if they are from God, no matter how hard you persecute, you will not succeed and you might find yourself at war with God.” It's amazing to read this document written in the First Century AD today and to think of the wisdom of this old guy—If they are from God, they will never perish, no matter how hard the common mentality or the persecution might go against them. The young, zealous Pharisee who was receiving this advice from Gamaliel was called Saul, and later he will convert to Christianity and will take the name “Paul.” It's St. Paul.

St. Paul, because of his education and because of his passion and because of his character and personality was one of the many leaders of Christianity, and was one of the first who understood that if, as we said the last time, the *Logos* was made flesh, if the *Verbum*, if God became a man, this must be the response for every human being. He was very Greek in this sense. He realized that if God became a man, this is what everyone, by the very fact that we have reason and that

we love reality, this is what everyone is looking for; therefore, Christianity must be announced to everyone. God came for everyone—this God, the God, the *Logos* incarnated. It's interesting because Paul took his passion and his ideal to spread Christianity very seriously, and he engaged in four different journeys in four different places, actually more than four, in different places following different routes in the Mediterranean Sea, and he ended up in Rome. We could talk for a long time about Paul and his journeys. But one of the experiences he had over and over again going around is that he realized that people coming from a Hellenistic or Roman or Greek mentality were more open, were at first more welcoming of the message that he was proclaiming while, on the other hand, many times starting (since he was a Jew) from the synagogue of different places, he met a strong opposition and a strong rejection. This became part of his certainty that the time was ripe for Christianity to be announced to everyone, and Paul played, as I said, a big part in the understanding that the Pope is trying to recall to us as he did in Regensburg. The Greek categories—Christianity is not another invention of another group, but is God who corresponds to human beings. The same God who created us came to rescue us and to fulfill our search.

The second episode is the time that when, for the first time in history Christians were called “Christians.” Where did we get this name from? Of course, from Christ, but where did it start? It started apparently, it's pretty certain, in Antioch. Antioch was a very big city—the third largest city in the Roman Empire. It was like the Chicago of the Roman Empire of the time. They were alive as a culture center. They were alive for trade and the exchange of ideas where there was a community of Jews who got there because of the Diaspora. What happened in Antioch was that Paul also happened to go there together with Barnabas, and they started a little community. First they addressed, as was their custom, the Jewish people, and some people got interested and some people kept meeting, and then they opened it up to the others, the gentiles, the non-Jews, or later the non-Christians. What happened there? People were completely puzzled looking at this group from the outside. Who are these people? There were probably 30, 40, not more than 50 people, maybe like us in this room at this moment. Who are these people? It's weird. What puts them together? Some of them, half, are Jewish; some of them, half, are Greeks. What brings them together? With a sort of despise they started calling them...there's only one thing that brings them together, this “Christ” they worship, and they started calling them, almost to make fun of them, *Christianos*, “the Christians.” Wherever they come from, what they care for, and what they follow is Christ. They are Christians. We kind of liked it and we kept this name. Still today what brings us together probably is the fact that we care or maybe we are curious about this Christ.

The third episode which was a big step in the development of the identity of Christianity is of course the Council of Jerusalem which was held in Jerusalem in the year 50, about 20 years after Christ was put to death and Christ rose. People in Jerusalem were wondering, what's going on? This situation that we see in Antioch is actually being reproduced everywhere. Everywhere Paul, Mark, Peter, Barnabas, the other disciples go, little, very little communities of different people start. But there was something that was hard for these people to accept which was the fact that again Jews, Gentiles and Greeks gathered together. And people started saying, “Wait a minute! If Jesus was a Jew and he never denied the law, if Mary, his mother, was Jewish, if the disciples he chose were Jewish, we cannot admit other people. Better, we can admit other people only upon the fulfillment of one condition, that they become Jewish. The issue of circumcision became one of the biggest issues of early Christianity. You realize that the problem underneath is a major one; it's like saying, is there a pre-condition for encountering Christ? Or to put it another way, did Christ actually come for everyone? Or to put it another way, which is the same, is Christ the *logos* incarnated? Sure he's the fulfillment of the path and the engagement of the Jewish trajectory, as we said, but is he also the fulfillment of the path that the Greeks followed? The *logos* that everyone, by the very fact that he's a human being, is looking for? Paul played a major, major role in the decision to not require circumcision for the Christians. Again, it's not

simply about a rule; it's an understanding of the event and the novelty that Christianity was in the world that was winning the day. Peter himself, the first pope, at first was really undecided. And there are, if you read, for example, Galatians, there are moments when Peter and Paul had real disagreements. We must make an effort today, and actually we should try to walk in these people's shoes and realize that they were persecuted by their authorities, they were persecuted by the police—the Romans, and all of a sudden they were looking at themselves, born and raised as Jews, and now the one guy we followed, the one guy who fascinated us and corresponded to our heart, is this becoming something else? It was a shock.

So within these two great traditions, there was also a great novelty. There was something which was new and peculiar to Christianity. And these three passages that I tried to sketch, the awareness of St. Paul, the fact that they started to realize that Christians are the ones who follow Christ, no matter where they come from, and the Council of Jerusalem, when they ruled about this, were main, key steps towards the development of the Church.

In the second part of my first part, if I can put it this way, I would like to underline what is Greek, what is Jewish, and also what is completely original and not Greek and not Jewish in Christianity. Going back again to the first lecture—the engagement of God with humanity—the incarnation, the fulfillment of the covenant—the covenant is being kept, mysteriously. Again with the same good dose of scandal when human experience bumps into something which reason seeks but cannot contain, like the mystery of God, this is, in a way, a continuity with the Jewish tradition. The perception of God as the universal, meaning He works for everyone. Universal *logos* is instead Greek.

What is not Greek and not Jewish? What is instead completely new, and actually it was hard for these people to accept? A couple of things: The first, the death of Jesus on the cross. Scandal, as Paul says, for the Jew, and craziness for the pagans. What?! You are proclaiming to me a god that human beings put on a cross?! This was the reaction of Greeks and Romans.

Very recently, about 20 years ago, they found in the Roman forum, which was downtown Rome, where all the main buildings were, an inscription carved on marble, and the inscription goes like this: There is a guy called Alexamenos (sounds like the name of maybe a slave, a poor guy), and he's in the act of kneeling down and looking up, and then he says, "Alexamenos worships his god." Great. And then if you keep looking at the inscription you see a cross and on the cross there is a guy, but the guy on the cross has the head of a donkey. It's like to say, "How stupid this Alexamenos! Can't you pick a better god than one who dies on the cross?" It was a scandal as you might imagine also for the Jew to think that the Messiah, long awaited, came and was executed by human beings including people of the Sanhedrin themselves.

The other thing which is completely new and completely original and hard to accept is the second part of the story, the good one, which is the resurrection. The resurrection is not Greek, is not Roman. Once you are dead, believe me, that's it! Enjoy your life! This was very much the Greco-Roman attitude. When, you might recall, Acts 17, Paul, during his third journey went to Athens, the great capital of philosophy, and the big philosophers, probably in a snobby way said, "Ha! Ha! Let's hear this guy. He has a funny accent." And they called him and they said, "So tell us about this new doctrine." They were the smart ones. Probably they were trying to trap him. And they listened to him, and Paul maybe was getting excited, I don't know, and at a certain point he mentioned the resurrection, and the philosophers started laughing. "This is a good one!" And then they said, "Thank you. We will listen to you some other time." And they left. It was so foreign to their mentality. It was foreign also to the mentality of the Jews. It's interesting if you listen to the readings this week after Easter. If you think of the reactions of the apostles, you might think that people who were pretty well trained in expecting something great and

exceptional from that one guy, right? They saw a great deal of miracles. When the women announced the resurrection to the disciples, they did not believe them. I don't think they were acting like, Ha, ha, ha! Let's try to get them! What a good joke this is! Probably they were pretty serious; they did not believe them. And then you can tell the stories of the resurrection as they are in the Gospels, it's always Christ, the risen Christ, going and re-choosing, and going to re-grasp one by one his own because they were so lost. The idea of the resurrection was completely foreign also from the point of view of the Jewish mentality.

To me, this that I'm telling you is somehow also proof, maybe not a scientific proof, but it's also proof of the historicity of the resurrection. They could not possibly come up with anything like this 2000 years ago. We, today, because of Christianity, are much more familiar with the idea. The name "resurrection" kind of means something. At that time it was just, I don't believe it. I start laughing. So Christianity was born at the crossroads, but it brings into existence in the history of humanity, it brings something which was completely unheard of—a God who is caring enough to die for his people, a God who is put to death by his people, a man who rises from the dead.

Now, in the second part of my lecture, (we will be happy to go back to this previous section maybe later in the questions), I would like to address and to briefly sketch the main constituent factors which Christianity brought into western civilization. One of the big claims that Rita mentioned again, the Regensburg address by Benedict XVI, one of the main points he makes is that western culture, which means our culture, is based on Christianity. He pushes his claim even farther. He says, "The betrayal of Christianity is somehow a betrayal of the pillars and the foundation of our cultural identity." I would like to address, first to show, to point out, first some main values which are very dear to us as western people, not to us as Christians. I'm pretty sure that if we jump out of this room and we go on the street and we ask people, they would feel strongly about some values which came into history through and thanks to Christianity. The five main values which I want to address are clearly chosen and explained by Fr. Giussani himself, and I found them on the Web site of Communion and Liberation, [www.clonline.org](http://www.clonline.org), and it's interesting because this is a response that he gave in a talk that he gave here in New York. He came in the 80s. I guess it was 86; I could be off by a couple of years. And someone asked, "What are the main values that Christianity contributed to western civilization?" And he answered off the top of his head, these five. I will mention them; I will try to explain them as he did, and then I would invite you to maybe go and check it out.

First, the infinite, un-debatable value of the person, the person as such. Think about modern America. Would we like, during a debate, someone telling someone else, "Oh, shut up! You're a woman.?" Whoa! Don't go there! Or you can also say it to someone from another race. We would just say, "Are you crazy?" It would not be, even rhetorically, a very good way to go about your argument. I'm not saying this is the reason, but we have inside our bones the understanding and the certainty that every single person has an infinite value as such. Before I look at your sex, before I look at your race, before I look at your bank account, you have a value which is infinite. Maybe I am preaching to the choir, and that's exactly the point. You say, "Whoa, thank you. We kind of knew that." That's exactly the point. This is the result of Christianity. What we don't think about, though, is the many times that it was not this way, and still today, in some places, it's not this way. For Romans there were different categories in their books of the law. If you are a free-born male, there are different sanctions than if you are a slave. If you were a slave, until the time of Christ, and even after, your master had the right over your life and death, pretty much like...of course people would say, "Come on, don't be too cruel to your slave." But like today people would say, "Oh, come on, you cannot kick your dog." It would not be such a bad crime as to kill another person. Sorry for the example, but it was not always this way. The infinite value of the person as such came into our culture, our mentality, with Christianity. Think about it.

The second is the value and the importance (again it's great to think about how this flourished in our countries and in our civilization) of work. Work means to engage reality and to shape it according to your ideal and according to your function. In the Medieval cathedrals, God was often portrayed in paintings or especially in sculptures as the eternal worker. And therefore work is like somehow participating in this mysterious process of the creation of something good, something positive. Work is not only a hard course imposed upon human beings; it's the possibility to express yourself. Think about the mentality of many of the monks and the nuns in the middle ages. They literally transformed Europe teaching people the beauty and the passion and the potential of work. It's something we feel strongly about today. We kind of think that our work somehow defines us, not only to measure us, but, "Hi, my name is Whatever and this is what I do." This again is Christian.

The third is the importance and the value of matter, especially of the human body. There is nothing more anti-historical and wrong theologically than to treat Christianity as a spiritual religion, to reduce Christianity to a sort of New Age set of beliefs. For Christians, by the very fact that we believe in the resurrection of ourselves, with our body, the way we are—we believe we were chosen and created a certain way, the way we are, we might like it or not, but that's the way it is—it gives to the corporal factor of the human being an incredible dignity. How many times did Christ talk about the body as the temple of the spirit? It's this incredible unit. Again it was not like this before, and in some places still today it's not like this.

I don't want to diverge, but personally I was horrified when no more than two weeks ago I was in Manhattan very close to Pier 17 and I saw this exhibit which apparently has been very successful which is called "Bodies." Apparently there's a certain guy who went to China and got some bodies of human beings, and he set them to expose them to show how the human body works, to show different bones and muscles and organs and so on. And what is different about this exhibit is they're not models, but they're human beings. I don't know the way you react, but when I heard this I was disturbed and shocked. I think that it's not only because I'm Christian. I think it's a natural reaction of coming from the very culture and mentality I was born into, I think. It means that the paganization of our culture has really come a long way.

The fourth value that Giussani brings up is the value of progress. The end of life and the end of history will be the final revelation of the mystery of God. So time is positive. We are not as human persons singularly, or as humanity, we are not walking towards the edge, and then we fall and that's it. We are somehow walking towards the final salvation and fulfillment. This, as a mentality, brings to the individual an incredible energy toward progress. This can become an illusion. This can become the illusion that progress will solve all my problems, so I will fix it myself. (I will talk about this in the next two lectures.) But the idea that time develops towards something somehow positive is very Christian. If you look at different people at the time of Jesus, or if you look at different mentalities now, there is not this understanding. It's not by chance that many of the greatest scientific discoveries have been made in western culture and western countries. It's not because we are the best, or it's not because we are the smartest, but there is, as an assumption, a certain positivity in the idea of moving knowledge or moving humanity one step forward. Other possible understandings of history are, for example, the cyclical understanding—history is like a big cycle. People have different numbers of years, and once you get to a certain point, like the Golden Age, you will fall down again, and then you will go up, but there is no final goal to reach and therefore, even as you enjoy running toward the Golden Age, you already know that it's going to go down. It's like the economy. Progress, therefore, is hindered at the very root.

The last value that is big for us and comes with Christianity and because of Christianity is freedom, the possibility to be free, to be who you are, to choose what you want, to express the way you are. Freedom is very dear to us and we would not like, again if we think about a debate, anyone imposing anything unfair on anyone's freedom. Again, in the next two lectures we will see how even this value can become somehow crazy, and even this positive new foundation could somehow, if it's not properly understood, betray the dream that it raises in human beings. Freedom was not like that at the time of Jesus. The way we understand freedom is completely different. And freedom still now is not the same in many countries in many simple, elementary ways including voting.

It's great when we think that the pillars and the things we are proud of in our culture and mentality are so completely and deeply Christian.

In the last part of my lecture, I would like to talk about two institutions that again are completely normal and typical for our life and our cities and our nations which did not exist and they are, again, a Christian invention. Let me start with a silly example. Let's imagine that because of a new possibility coming up with your job, you think seriously about moving. It's not an easy decision. New York is such a great place and I love it here, but it's clearly an offer that I must seriously consider. And so I am going to live in whatever city in another state somewhere out there. I'm not really certain, but you know, it's for a few years and maybe I'll come back. I'm debating and talking with my wife or with my husband and trying to test my children, and it's not an easy decision. And then I decide and I say to my family, "Let's go and check it out." I don't want to make a decision based on the Internet, just because they say it's a great city. I want to go there. What would be, I believe for all of us, a couple of aspects of this whatever city we would consider that we would seriously look at? Let me keep my silly example. It's a done deal. I'm leaving. There are a couple of things that could really twist your arm and make you say, "Whoa! Maybe not! Maybe I don't want to be there." Let's imagine that you are ready to go and they tell you, "Listen, I have to tell you. I know that place because I'm from there. The education for your children is miserable. Miserable! Forget about kindergarten. It's dangerous. They don't learn anything. It's just miserable." You would think twice. Education for us, schools, universities, high schools, kindergartens is in part defining a value for me and for my family, and an identity of a nation, then of a city. Cities can take pride in having good education and that would certainly factor in in the decision to move versus not to move.

Greeks and Romans did not have education like we do. It was all a private business. If you have money, you can get a tutor. If you don't, I'm sorry. And the result was that people didn't know how to read, didn't know how to write, didn't know their history and so on. They knew what they knew through orations they listened to or a few monuments, and I wonder what they got out of it. Education, the way we conceive it, with a teacher in the classroom, with a program, with colleagues, with a school, with a university, is a Christian invention. It does not come out of ancient cities. Pick an ancient city; look carefully at the map. You can find a lot of things that somehow had a similarity with our mentality. You can find temples, you can find markets, you can find libraries, public buildings, places for people to gather. You can find a lot. You will not find a building which is a school.

Where do you find a building which is a school? Where do you find a place or a program which later developed into a school? In the medieval monasteries. In the medieval monasteries there were a couple of rooms. One was called the *scriptorium*, which is the place where people write (*scribere*). And it was the place dedicated to the copying of the manuscripts. And the other was the actual school where the monks provided education for not only themselves but the people around them. It's interesting to think about the development of modern cities as certainly coming

from a lot of other things including and maybe in a big way including the little plant of a typical medieval monastery.

But there is one other thing that I want to mention which comes from the same origin which is again a Christian invention which is again big for us. There is another thing which your friend who is trying to keep you in New York could bring up. He could say, “Whoa, it’s not just education, but watch out! Before you go make sure you are in good health because the health system there is miserable! There are no hospitals, and if you find one, stay out of it.” For us, as much as education, the health system, given what we said about the value of the person, is a big part of what we look for and of what defines a city or a nation as such. How much money we spend on health! It’s a judgment. It means we value it.

On the map of ancient cities before Christianity, in the Holy Land, in the Roman Empire, in the Persian Empire, take your choice, there is no hospital. There is no hospital. There were some doctors, private practice. Go if you have the money. If you just happen to know about this one guy who takes care of this one problem which you happen to have in this moment, and cross your fingers. There is not such a thing as a hospital.

Where does the hospital come from? In a way it comes from what we were saying before—the infinite value of every person. The common mentality was, if you are sick, I better keep away from you because I don’t want to get it too, right? Who were the ones who recognized and took seriously the infinite value of each person to the point that they were willing to even risk their lives to assist others? They were the monks. It’s amazing when we read, for example, the descriptions of plagues in the ancient world because they always carried with them somehow the destruction of the humanity that comes along with the plague because all of a sudden everyone takes care of himself. I don’t want to be next to you because I don’t want to get that thing. The ones who invented the hospital or who started taking care of other people were the monks. So once again, these two defining factors of our civilization, our nation, our cities, do not come from anything else but from—it’s like an enlargement, like zooming in on the little map of the medieval monastery.

I will wrap up, and then we can go into questions. I was speaking about the rise and the foundation of Christianity at the crossroads between the Greco-Roman trajectory and the Jewish trajectory. Then I tried to sketch the development of the identity of Christianity. The one thing that I would like to stress because it was very dear to Fr. Giussani is that Christians and Jews are really coming from the same root. Giussani was very passionate about this. It’s really the same God. And so, somehow, as Christians, I don’t really know what it means, but a Christian somehow to have the desire to one day, since we really acknowledge the same God, since we really think that Christ is the fulfillment of the covenant he started with the Jews, maybe one day, I don’t know how, we might get back together. I think it’s just a good desire to have. I don’t really have good images to attach to it.

In the second part, I tried to sketch some of the main values that Christianity contributed to our mentality and to our civilization as such. And in the last part, the institutions that came from the springing forth from these values. Thank you very much.