



New York Cultural Center

Religious Awareness in Modern Man

Notes on Christianity and Culture in the Works of Luigi Giussani

April 23, 2007: “Has Mankind Failed the Church?”

by Luca Grillo

Good evening. Thank you, everyone. Thank you for waiting. I'm very impressed. I'm really sorry. I guess Rita told you there was a fire apparently. I didn't see it from the window, but we were told there was a fire, and I spent two and a half hours on the train, the same train that got me on time two weeks ago and last week. I'm sorry, though.

I'll give you a very brief summary of the previous lectures and then I'll give you a summary of today's lecture, given the time!

In the first lecture we said that Christianity was born at the Crossroads between the Jewish tradition and the God that got involved with the Jewish people, the God who chose a people to enter into history, and, on the other hand, Greek tradition, the search for God, the search of reason, of philosophy, for the Infinite, the Mystery, the ultimate God. Christianity was born at the crossroads and claimed to be, somehow, the fulfillment of both.

In the second lecture we spoke about the development of Christianity as the fulfillment of these two great trajectories and cultures, and also of Christianity as the foundation of western civilization, and we said that the values and the greatest institutions that define and that we take pride in in our culture were born out of the Christian event, out of this history.

The lecture of today and the lecture of next week, which will be the fourth and last, address two tremendous questions the way they were formulated by the British poet T.S. Eliot. Talking about the devastation of humanity and the devastation we live in, he asks two questions, the first question, which is the content of the lecture today, and the second, which is the content of the next lecture. “Has mankind abandoned the Church, or has the Church abandoned mankind?”

Today we will talk about mankind's abandonment of the Church. What happened? If Christianity is the foundation of our western civilization, what happened? Why is it so different for us today? I will develop the lesson in two different parts. First, I would like to sketch, really briefly, the three main stages of this process of mankind abandoning the Church, mankind abandoning Christianity. In the second part I will talk about some characteristics and some consequences of this distancing and abandonment.

I have to say that the real goal of these last two lectures, today's and next week's, is to get you to read this booklet [*Religious Awareness in Modern Man* by Luigi Giussani], so it's by no means an attempt to substitute your reading as much as a suggestion and an invitation for you to pick up this book and read it. It's very logical and I believe it's very clear, and there are some interesting quotes that document the change in chronological order that I'm going to talk about. It's also interesting, I have to say, to think about the development and the trajectory that Giussani dictates in light of the recent and controversial Regensburg Address of Pope Benedict XVI, and I will conclude with a couple of parallel quotes to show how similar these paths are.

The first step in this distancing and abandonment of the Church on humanity's part would take place with humanism, where around the end of the 14th or 15th Century Europe, and Italy and France were, at the time, leading countries in the culture of the time. We are at the end of the Middle Ages—a time which was characterized by a very strong and deep influence of Christianity. The ideal for people in the Middle Ages, the ideal, the dream of people in the Middle Ages was naturally to be a saint. Humanism and the end of the 14th and the beginning of the 15th Century is the time when this did not happen anymore, and we start seeing a certain split. How so? The dream and the ideal which was projected and proposed by the dominant culture and the common mentality was no longer the saint, but was somehow the star, which means someone who is capable of succeeding, of standing out because of something. It's not bad, and in a way, if we look at our contemporary society, it's very much based on this. It's not bad to try to excel in something; the problem is that someone after humanism would bet his fulfillment as a human being on this success in something very partial. Think of the way it is today. We are really children of that culture. Again, when we meet each other and we go around the table for introductions, it's so easy to say, "Hi, my name is _____," and then I tell you what I'm good at. It's funny when I start a new class and I meet my new students for the semester, the very way they introduce themselves is, "Hi, my name is John, and I play football," and "My name is Sarah and I dance." It's great. And you say, "Whoa! Wonderful!" And then you think, Wow, I hope there is something bigger that defines your identity, that defines who you are. I hope you are aware that there is indeed something bigger that defines who you are.

A way to illustrate the problem of humanism I used in high school to try to get the point across to high school students, it's sort of provocative, and I will use the same with you. I used to go to class and I brought generally two pictures for that class to get them to understand the problem of humanism. The first picture which I unscrolled on the board was generally a picture of a great person, generally Mother Teresa worked really well. And I put Mother Teresa right on the board. And on the other side, right away, I unscrolled another picture which was generally a picture of a great star, it depended on the year, or on the semester. It could be a great football or basketball player, a great singer, an actor, whatever—a great star. Generally I tried to pick someone who was not the greatest moral model, and it was a pretty easy choice, I have to say. And then I addressed my students, and I said, "You guys, based on what you may know about these people—you know exactly who they are based on pretty general common sense, what you might have read in newspapers or seen on television about these people—tell me, who do you think is the best human being? Not in terms of committing less sins, but in terms of who you think would express better the fulfillment of what a human being is." They didn't like the question. But then they simply responded, "Mother Teresa." And then I said, "Who would you like to be?" They didn't like the second question either, and their response was silence. And then for a moment you could see them saying, Whoa! What is this? Where does this split inside me (because I'm talking about myself too),

where does this split come from? How is it possible that with my reason I do acknowledge someone to be a great expression of a fulfilled human being, and I am sincere in the knowledge of this—I'm not lying! I do believe that someone could represent what human beings are better than what I could, or better than what someone else could, and on the other hand, what attracts me as a model, what drags my affection, so to speak, what I dream of being—it's something else. These two pictures, in a stupid example, if you want, express this split that started with humanism. What I recognize with my brain and with my reason, no longer coincides with what drags me, what attracts me. In the Middle Ages, a person like St. Francis was literally able, by the very humanity that he lived and transmitted, to drag masses. He was a popular person, much more than what we could think a popular saint could be today.

Before I move on to the next development, let me say that there is a big risk for us when we talk about saints. (Again this is from my experience of teaching high school.) This mentality of succeeding in a detail is something partial. It's so rooted in us that we end up thinking that the saint is the one guy or girl who succeeds in the pious, religious aspect of life. So if we go back to the example before and we imagine a classroom where people are introducing themselves: "Hi, I'm John and I play football." "Hi, I'm Sarah and I dance." "Hi, I am Gareth and I'm very pious." You laugh! And I'm glad you do because, first of all, everyone would look at the poor guy and say, "Whoa, couldn't you find anything else to do with your time and your talents?" This is not what a saint is. A saint is not someone who is excelling in the particular aspect of being a good guy, or of being pious. A saint is the fulfillment of a human being in his or her relationship with the God who creates him or her. This is what a saint is; therefore, a saint is not only good, but he should be fascinating like it was in the Middle Ages.

The second step (the booklet develops this in more detail) right after humanism, and I have to say born from humanism, is what Giussani identifies with the Renaissance. So we keep going about more or less a hundred years to the end of the 15th or 16th, some countries even 17th Century, this idea that what affirms you, that your fulfillment is your capability to excel in something—take your pick, it doesn't matter, just in something—generated the understanding that life must be good. If I deny God as the source of my positivity, as the source of my life, as the source of my identity, where do I get it from? Because I still exist. The general and generic response that the Renaissance gave was nature. And these people started being pantheistic—they worshiped everything. They worshiped nature. With this idea, it sounds a little bit New Age, they developed the understanding that if nature is what generates us, they didn't call it "God" anymore, if nature is good, we are naturally good. Therefore, somehow, following our instinct, following who we are, we would do good. This was the origin of great frustration and of great misunderstandings. We will get to that point. But the second aspect of the development of the Renaissance is that it starts being a little anti-God. There is the impression that not only does nature generate us, but if we are skilled, if we succeed in something, we do not really need God. The way it has been formulated is (and again, you'll find this in the booklet), if God does exist, He does not matter. I don't really know if God exists. Anyway, I don't really care because it's far away, it's distant, it does not matter. The way I live my life, the way I perform my daily tasks, the way I live my work, the way I treat the people that I love, doesn't depend, has nothing to do with God because if God exists, it does not matter. It is the de-incarnation. Didn't God, as we said in the first lecture, become flesh? Flesh means that God does matter. God does have to do with everything. He is the center and the focus of life. The Greeks understood this. The Jews believed this. Christianity was founded upon this and the recognition that this one God is Jesus Christ. And then humanism, first, and then the Renaissance lost it.

The third and last step that I want to bring up for this development is for sure the step of rationalism which matured and peaked in pre-revolutionary France, and that actually led to the revolution itself. What's the step? If nature is good, we naturally act well. What's the way to understand and to measure everything in reality, everything we come into contact with? The response is always the same. They said, "It's reason." It's a great response, but they understood it in an extremely narrow way. And the way they used the word reason sounds like the same way that the Greek philosophers used it. It has nothing to do with the way the Greek philosophers used it! Why? For them, reason became the measure of reality. Everything that does not fit my measure and my reason is not reasonable. This is an incredible restriction of reason. If you remember, I finished the first lecture reading a quote from Plato. What's the peak of reason, we said? The intuition, the secret desire that the unknown God might come, the secret desire for revelation. Therefore, reason is humble in front of the certainty that the very object I seek, I can perceive, but I cannot measure, I cannot contain, I cannot define. In other words, I cannot put God into the narrow box of my reason. Ultimately the claim of rationalism is the claim to be God, to tell God the way God should be and what God can do. I measure everything. Political Science, different sciences and different methods which are still strong in our culture come, unfortunately, from this narrow understanding of reason. How many times has it happened to you that someone told you, "Prove it to me! If you can't prove it to me, it's not true."? But wait a minute! I'm extremely certain of many things that I could not easily prove to you, but it would be a violence to tell me, "therefore it's not true." For example, (the example is from Fr. Giussani) if you ask me, "Does your mother love you?" I would say, "Yes." And I would say "yes" with certainty. But if you challenge me and say, "Well, prove it to me! There is a blackboard there. I want an equation. At the end, you have to say, 'Therefore, I proved my mother loves me.'" I wouldn't know where to start. This would be an application of this restriction of the value of reason. Whatever cannot be measured and contained, does not exist; it's not reasonable, or it's not knowable. Apply this to God. Apply this to the meaning of life. It's clearly a betrayal of the very impetus that, at first, moves reason, of the very spark that lunges reason into the great adventure of knowing and grasping reality, everything.

The consequences and the characteristics of these three different steps are, first of all, a frustrated optimism. Think about this presumptuous claim of the Renaissance: Nature generates us. Nature is good. We are good. We naturally do good. It sounds good. Think about the history of the last one hundred years humanity entered, especially after World War II, and all the terrible tragedies that ideologies generated and promoted. Humanity reached a crisis. And now what? We've convinced ourselves, excel in something, and you'll be fine. We've convinced ourselves that we don't really need God anymore and that our reason can grasp the understanding of everything. What did we produce? I challenge you to find in the history of humanity tragedies like the ones we've witnessed in the last one hundred years. Wars there've been ever since. But the big problem of ideologies is like justifying and self-feeding a mistake. Think about the tragedies promoted by Communism or by Nazism. Can we still say that humanity is naturally good? Can we still say that we can fix it, we can measure it, we don't really need God? The result of human beings trying to become God is the destruction of humanity. And what we register today is the destruction of humanity. And if you look around there could be many people who are "successful," who have "made it" according to the ideal of humanism, who excel in something, and they are, maybe, sad, and they are, maybe, (and I say this, I hope, without judgment), poor human beings. Maybe they are the best in something, yet they don't know how to relate to a person that they love. The result, I repeat, is the destruction of humanity.

There are two quotes which you will find in the booklet, in case I haven't said it enough. One is by Winston Churchill. Giussani tells this episode. After World War II, Churchill was invited by MIT, and the president of the university gave a very high and very big address to introduce him, praising the progress of the new civilization and of technology, and at the end he said, "We are not too far from the time when, thanks to science, we will be able to program and plan everything so that a new Hitler will never be born again." It sounds great, but it's like, you control, you measure, you define what every human being and every brain should think. And Churchill gave a very polite thanks, (he was a British man, after all), and then he said, "Thank you for your address and thank you for what you said. By that time, I would rather be dead." It was like a very strong statement, but to say, I don't want to live in a world where human reason can claim and succeed in measuring everything.

The second example is from another great intellectual of this last century who is also a very good historian of the history of the Church whose books are just being reprinted—Daniel Ropps. In an address in another very odd intellectual circle, a l'academie de France, he related how in the end of the Timaeus, which is a dialogue of Plato, Plato tells this story. (It's one of the famous myths of Plato): There was a land which was called Atlantis, which was the land of the lucky ones, the blessed, the Machairoi. People lived so happily that they forgot about the gods. Not only that, but they said that they did not need the gods anymore because they could grant happiness to themselves. It seems like Plato, twenty centuries before more or less, and it's pretty interesting what became the ideal of the civilization with the Renaissance and humanism. And the gods decided to take action. And the gods decided to blow the whole island up. And looking from afar, this happy island looked like a big mushroom of cloud, and Daniel Ropps, in telling this story which Plato tells first, concluded that with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with the invention, thanks to science and technology, it looks like this dream has come true. And what was destroyed by this attempt to measure everything was not only a city, but humanity as such.

It's interesting because in the second lecture talking about the development of Christianity, we said, for example, that freedom is a great thing, and we said that progress came about with and thanks to Christianity. Look, if you deny the origin and the spring from which a value is born, look how this value can turn against itself. And something positive like a positive idea of life and time as a journey, and therefore progress, can become the rhythm for the destruction of humanity. Look around.

The second characteristic and the second consequence of this destruction of humanity and of this process of the distancing of humanity from God is the cultural sense of being lost, a cultural bewilderment. There are some quotes which Giussani puts in the booklet, and I would like to read at least a couple of them. Human beings, modern human beings, walk through life with a sense of being lost probably much more than ever before. A poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1951 wrote this poem. His name is Par Lagerkvist. It's page 20, in case you have the booklet.

A man unknown is my friend
 someone I do not know, a stranger far, far away.
 For him my heart is full of longing
 because He is not near me.
 Perhaps because He does not even exist?
 Who are you who fill my heart with your absence,
 who fill the whole world with your absence? (1951)

Wasn't this the original desire that moved Plato in his prophesy of Christianity four centuries before it happened? We are back to square one. We forgot about what happened and now we say, "Who are you who fill my heart with your absence?" If you remember, or maybe I didn't use this example, sorry. When Paul arrived in Athens and he announced the Resurrection, before arriving and talking to the people, he saw this little altar with an inscription carved on the altar in Greek saying, "To the unknown God". The altar had been dedicated to a god who was perceived but not known. It seems like we are going back to this, but we are filled with nostalgia. The friend I desire to meet is unknown, and I even doubt that he even exists.

The second is an incredible letter whose author you could never guess. Let me read it first and then I'll tell you who wrote it. It's on the bottom of page 22 in the booklet. If you want to read along, it's okay. It's not a test.

I feel like a man again, [It's a man writing to his beloved wife.] because I experience a great passion; and the multiplicity of things in which study and modern culture entangle us, and the skepticism by which we must be brought to criticize all the impressions, subjective and objective, are deliberately made to leave us small and weak and mournful and indecisive. But love, not for the man of Feuerbach, not for the metabolism of Moleschott, not for the proletariat, but love for the beloved, for you, this is what makes a man to be a man once again.

It's a great letter. I love it. It's so filled with humanity. It was written by Karl Marx. The one person who built this utopia and this project of communism and socialism is the one man who had to admit himself that when I really feel like a man, it's because I'm in front of you, and he's talking to his beloved wife. That is to say, it's not the great, cunning, sophisticated systems we build with our mind that can possibly save me and the rest of humanity; there is a real human being there, and that is the man who is talking in this letter.

The last quote that I would like to read because it expresses both the devastation of humanity and the nostalgia for a meaning, for consistency. It is a quote by an Italian writer who committed suicide a few years after he wrote this poem. His name is Cesare Pavese and the poem is on page 25 of the booklet. He just got a big prize for a very prestigious acknowledgment of literature in Italy and he says:

There is nothing more bitter
 than the sunrise of a day on which nothing will happen;
 There is nothing more bitter
 than uselessness...
 The dragging hours
 are merciless for the one who no longer waits for anything.

This could be after the great positive illusion of humanism and the Renaissance, ultimately this could be the way people look at their day in the morning, and ultimately the way people look at their life. After the illusion of becoming able to define the meaning and to measure the meaning and to manipulate the meaning, after the illusion of saying, "We don't need God anymore,"—this is the result.

As a conclusion, and then we can move into questions, if any, I would like to just recall to your attention what I said at the beginning. The trajectory that you can find in more detail in this booklet is incredibly parallel if not really the same as the trajectory that Pope Benedict drew in his address at Regensburg. When he talks, he uses a different term, but it's really the same cultural development. He talks about the "dehellenization of faith." Dehellenization is like the get away from the Greeks, which means get away from the way Greeks understood reason, openness and the search for the ultimate meaning, the mystery, God. We are trying to get away from this, Christianity itself, and the consequences are like a split between faith and philosophy, and the consequences are like we think and we believe sometimes that to believe we have to give up our brain and we have to be losers. It is exactly the opposite; the more we search the way reason is given to us, with this openness, with this curiosity, with this energy to adhere to reality, the more we bump into the overwhelming presence of God. It's interesting because the pope also draws the main stages and especially focusing on the consequences on theology. He draws, I was saying, the main stages of this process as he identifies them pretty much in the same way as Giussani. He speaks about rationalism as the reduction of reason, and his final appeal, if you remember, didn't get a lot of credit by the press because they were busy talking about something else. The main appeal is to really stretch our reason which is like being loyal to the way we've been created. Our reason has been given to us by God in order to search for him, to put it like St. Augustine. Our reason is not given to us to build a little, narrowly-measured tomb for ourselves, but it's to open ourselves to something more. Only this something more can possibly fulfill us today as 2,000 years ago. And this secret desire that moved Plato, which was announced by Christianity, was denied in the way I said, with the main consequences that I tried to sketch.

I will stop here. We can maybe start with questions because I feel bad that we started so late, and again, you'll find more in what I think is a clear formulation in the booklet. Thank you.