



New York Cultural Center

Religious Awareness in Modern Man

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

“Has the Church Failed Mankind?”

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Columbia University, Earl Hall, New York, NY

by *Luca Grillo*

Simmonds: Good evening, and welcome to our lecture, "Has the Church Failed Mankind?" organized by Crossroads New York Cultural Center and the Columbia Campus Ministry. Tonight's lecture is the fourth and last in a series 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 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 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. It is a pleasure to again welcome him here tonight.

Grillo: Good evening everyone. Thank you. Sorry for being a little late again. I will start briefly with a short summary of the previous lectures and then I have another short premise and we can tackle the theme of today pretty much in two main parts.

Summary of the previous lectures—it's getting shorter and shorter because they're becoming more. The first, the title was "Christianity at the Crossroads of Greek Reason and Jewish Tradition," and very much in accordance, as Rita just said, with the Regensburg address where the Pope spoke about a deep encounter between the Greek search, through reason, for the ultimate mystery, the *arche*, the beginning upon which we all depend, and the engagement of this mystery with human beings through a precise people—the Jewish people. Hellenization and the Pope's call to Hellenization was the time when these two cultures broadened and they came into contact with each other. At that point in space, at that point in time, at the encounter between these two attempts to bridge the daily life of everyone with the

ultimate star, we said, destiny, Christianity came as a fact—something new in history founded and based upon these two great traditions.

Lecture Number Two—Christianity brought something new, and upon Christianity much of our western civilization, as a matter of fact, was born in terms of values, in terms of things we consider worthy, in terms of everything. We were talking about big words that we still understand in a certain way because of and thanks to Christianity such as freedom, person (the value of each person), and democracy, or big institutions like schools for education, or hospitals.

Third Lecture—If this is the case, if this is true, what happened? Why is the Church, many times when we talk with people, our colleagues or the people we meet, why is the Church so distant and far away? And the two titles for the two last lectures, the one we had last Monday and the one we are going to have today, are taken from a very bitter but also provocative statement and poem from T.S. Eliot, “Has mankind abandoned the Church, or has the Church abandoned mankind?” The previous lecture was about mankind abandoning the Church. What happened? We tried to sketch the three main steps and developments of this problem as a process of falling apart and becoming distant. If we said in the Middle Ages that the saint was the model and the ideal of the person who fulfills who he or she is, with humanism, which is the first step, instead of the saint, a person who fulfills his or her humanity, a real person, is the star—someone who succeeds in something very small and particular. Maybe you are a poor human being, but you’re really good at something. That will buy you success, and people will envy the way you are. This is what humanism as a cultural operation brought about, and we can still see traces and fruits of this process around us.

The second step, right after humanism and springing out of humanism is the Renaissance, the idea that nature is good; we are made by nature and according to nature, so we are naturally good. We do not need salvation. We naturally, almost instinctively, behave well and properly. In this picture there’s no real room for God, and people started saying, If God exists, it does not matter. What counts, what matters for my life are my skills, my job, my relationships, my....you name it. God is far away, distant, apart. He has nothing to say about real life where I live daily and what I do daily.

The third and last step of this process of bringing Christianity and the Christian announcement far from the people is of course rationalism which is also what Pope Benedict XVI addresses clearly in his speech. Rationalism is this claim of reason of being capable of explaining and reducing everything according to my own measure. If reason is only what I can prove, if reason is only what I can demonstrate through scientific formulas, there is so much of life which is left out including the mystery of God. If this is the case, reason and faith have nothing to do with each other. But if reason, as we learned looking at the Greeks, is this ultimate openness and search for reality, for the meaning of reality, for the origin, for the ultimate mystery, then faith is like the natural fulfillment of reason; moreover, faith can be deeply reasonable even if there are things that I cannot prove or demonstrate. This is the challenge we are dealing with.

Today, in the last lecture, we will see (this question is a bit sad and very dramatic) has the Church also abandoned humanity? Did we, as Catholics, play a part in this process of falling away from people and where they are?

I will start the theme of today with an example. In my experience teaching both in high school and in college, I run into, over and over again, these two opposite experiences. When I'm teaching or talking to my students, if I have a point that I want to get across and I use an image, and example or the language of the experience of love, all of a sudden they all lean forward in their chairs and look attentive and interested, and I can see that I have them, because what I'm talking about appeals to them and it resonates with an experience that they find within themselves. If I talk about, or I use an image or language or an example, and instead of the word "love," I throw in the word "Church," they all move back in their seats. It's the opposite. Wait a minute! They get defensive. And instead of opening them up, you have this effect of shutting them down. And I always ask, "Why? Why? Isn't what we are talking about the greatest possible thing? Didn't Christianity start as the good news, a fact, the historical announcement that the very mystery, the very God that every human being, by the very fact that we exist, is looking for—this God came!" Shouldn't it be the opposite? That when you say, "the Church," the place that claims to have this as a presence, shouldn't it open us up to say, "Whoa! This must be interesting,"? But it's the opposite. Why? What happened?

The booklet that was reprinted and that I tried to push on you really hard during the last lecture, and I will still do in this lecture, puts this as three different steps. There are three different reasons, or we could say, let's use the word, three different *reductions* of Christianity. So the way that the Pope, if we look at the Regensburg Address, and the way that Giussani respond to this question is that Christianity is not being presented in its fullness, and at the core of the matter. There are three different kinds of reductions that we get continuously. The first comes from what we can call a Protestantization of Christianity. And Giussani's very clear, and I would say also the Pope is very clear in saying that this is not an attack on Protestants. This is more of a way to take a step back and become aware of ourselves. So I'm not bringing this up to trash our Christian brothers and sisters, but instead to say what is being changed in the delivery of the Christian message. The first thing which is the process of the Catholic Church becoming more Protestant is the reduction of the fact of Christ, of the event of Christianity to word. "Word" meaning something that you say, or the reduction of Christianity to, for example, the Gospel. What's the problem with this in theory? And then we'll give the existential consequences. The first problem in theory is that the announcement of Christianity (we said this in the second lecture) the beginning of John, Chapter 1, is that Logos, the Word, was made flesh, and that's where you still today, the same method, get a chance to encounter this Word. It was made flesh; it entered into the flesh of a human being, who was called Jesus. This is the beginning and still is the method and the good announcement of Christianity. We cannot try to get rid of or put aside this flesh and go back to the pure word.

What are the existential consequences if we reduce Christianity to word? The first is subjectivism. You understand it this way; I understand it another way. It inspires you in this way, and me in this other way. I feel this way; you feel that way. If we look at history and the different processes of branching off into different denominations and sub-denominations, we see that historically this is the case. Besides, how do you argue, where is the big claim of logos and reason in this process? Again it's subjectivism. What is the problem with subjectivism? It seems really cool because you feel like there is the subject there. You feel like you matter, you count, what you think, what you understand. Again, what you feel is what matters. So you feel alive and active. The problem is, if this is the case, as a subject alone I do not have the possibility, I do not have the power to stand up to the dominant culture. And so easily as a subject I end up absorbing, even without realizing it, the judgments, the categories, the culture that I breathe everywhere until I am sort of the same, and with time, the very way I react and the very way I feel are

determined, as an effect, by the common mentality. Two examples: Think culturally how much and how deeply the general reaction of people changes about the Ten Commandments. If you run them through your mind and say, okay, don't do this, don't do that, and so on, you don't need to study ancient history—go back fifteen, twenty, thirty years, you can see how different influences of the common mentality make something really really big or really really small. And we too, since we live in this world, in this society, buy into this mentality. Subjectivism does not have the strength to stand up to the general culture, and we give in before we realize it to the power, and the result is that we reduce, before we realize it, the big claim of Christianity, the big announcement, the big news, the big fact.

The other reduction which also comes from this reduction of Christianity to the word is the reduction of Christianity to moralism. Again, if the problem is to interpret a text or a word which is not in the flesh, which is not incarnated, if what I meet is a set of words and not a person, like the apostles did, there is a lot of room for moralism. So we can really discuss and debate about what is right and what is wrong, and moralism is actually even more cunning as an art. It's like telling you up to which point it's right, and then, oops!, you step out of it. Now you're wrong. This is what the Romans used to call *decus*, what is proper, and from *decus* comes the word decency. I remember teaching high school and having a discussion among the teachers about the dress code. It was exactly like this. It was fun. People were coming, bringing pictures cut from newspapers, and they were saying, "This is okay, until here [points to the abdomen], but if you show two more inches of your belly, it's not okay!" This would be the moralistic approach. I tell you the borderline. Until this is fine, but after this it's not. This is all too often and sadly what the Church is seen for. We think about the big issues which are debated in the newspapers, and how many times do we hear someone excited about saying, "The Word was made flesh." It's like tugging on your arm and saying, Wait a minute! What you are looking for is a possibility existentially, or for example, all your pain and suffering has a meaning. How many times do we hear this versus the Church taking a stand on a, b, c...this is right, this is wrong, up to this point it's "yes". This is a reduction that the general media make and sometimes we also accept. And this is called what people from the outside see about the Church. I have to say, I'll be honest, I myself, if it were not because the Word was made flesh in my life, if it weren't because I myself met a person, people, I could name them, I would not be very interested in this Christianity, in the Christianity of the borderline, of "You can do this, but watch out! Not that!" Again, if this is the case, there is not a real possibility to stand up to the general power and the common mentality because in the end, who determines what is acceptable and what is not? Again, I don't need to give you examples. Think about twenty years ago. Things that were generally easily common, not acceptable, or acceptable, and are not anymore. It changes and unless we are anchored to flesh, a life, a community, we are lost in the middle of the ocean. We can try to swim really hard, but the current is bigger and it drags us to where we don't even realize we are going. This is an image of the reduction of Christianity, coming, as I said, from the same reduction. We go back to the word, and we cut off the flesh.

The third consequence of this is that if Christianity is reduced to word, without flesh, besides subjectivism, as I said, and moralism, if it's all up to me as a subject to say what I understand, what I feel, what I want, how I interpret something, there is a big, dangerous cut with tradition. And this is a problem. It's a problem for us. It's no longer like I can really see that St. Paul or St. Peter or St. Francis or Mother Cabrini or St. Dominic or St. Clare, that these people had exactly the same experience that I'm having today; therefore, I'm really in communion with them, meaning that my life is fascinated and determined by that same Presence that dragged them along. This is the concept of tradition. The other concept of tradition which is fundamental for Christianity is that Jesus did not write a book, did not even

type up his words. If Christianity was supposed to remain as a word, why didn't he (of course he also had us in mind) give us words? If we want to put everything that Jesus did in a nutshell, miracles, parables, healings, meeting people, and so on. Tell me if we cannot summarize everything written in the Gospels this way. What Jesus did afterwards was to start the Church. He picked some people; he spent time with them, and he convinced them over and over and over again (because they did not understand, because they forgot, because they were stubborn, because they didn't get it—literally how many times did Jesus say, “Are you asking me this question after what you've heard and seen?”) What he did in a nutshell is that he started the Church. He also said it pretty clearly. At the end, at the very end of the Gospel—it's very clear, for example in Matthew, Chapter 28, the conclusion, he says, “I will be with you now and forever.” Who are the “you” he was talking to? And what is the way he chose to keep his promise, which means he was talking to us—“Now and forever.” There is a value in tradition. This “you” he was talking to were his disciples, which is the beginning of the Church. And the very way he decided to keep his promise was as it happened at the beginning, “The Word was made flesh,” through the Church, through the ones who had been chosen. This is the reason why we cannot accept slipping back into this reduction of Christianity without flesh.

Notice (and I like to take this for myself as a provocation) flesh means flesh. Flesh means also that sometimes we bump into things that we don't like. It's much easier to find your way around a word because you can interpret it, reduce it, read the next sentence and not think about it. But when you bump into flesh, which means when you bump into a person, and this person is another person with a certain character, with a certain personality, with a certain history, with a certain sensitivity, and so on...but this actually was part of the deal since day one. Since day one when they met Jesus, the first comment was, “A guy from Nazareth?!” And when Jesus started performing miracles which took a while—it's much easier for us to think in retrospect—for these people, the son of the carpenter, there was this scandal of the flesh right there for these people which is the reason why, to go back to the Regensburg Address, the Pope invites us to broaden our reason to allow, to understand and to embrace something that at first seems beyond our expectation.

An example and a consequence of this cut with tradition (because I interpret, and the one who comes near me in space can interpret it in another way, and the one who came before me in time can maybe interpret it in another way—we are not necessarily one and the same—the Body of Christ) the consequence of this is again a big reduction of culture. The claim that the Church has according to the statement of Paul to “judge everything and keep what has value” was a big challenge that Paul launched to the early Church. “Judge everything.” And if you look at the way Christianity engaged itself with everything around it, it's amazing. They were not afraid. They were not afraid like Jesus was not afraid to talk with the Samaritan woman who was a prostitute. The early Church was able, therefore, to assimilate different cultures and values without losing its identity. In the second lecture we spoke of the Council of Jerusalem which is very much aimed in this direction.

If the Church is easily, if Christianity is easily reduced to these three narrowings of Christianity that I repeat are subjectivism, moralism and tradition, what could be the “solution”? What can we do once we hear how much we forgot, or how much we reduced what we received? What can we do? The response is nothing new and that's probably why it's good because the response is that it's the invitation to go back to the original fact, and I would like to give a couple of examples. First, as we said, Christianity starts as a fact. We read at the end of the first lecture and the second lecture that when John, in the first chapter of his Gospel, the beginning of the story, describes the beginning, he's very attentive in giving

us details about time and space. It's not, "Once upon a time in a land far, far away, Jesus came." It's "Along the shore of the river Jordan," which means it's real life, it's geography. There is a precise spot. And then we are told, (and we might wonder why, who really cares?) "It was four p.m." It was about, what the Romans call "ninth hour." And they don't tell us what Jesus spoke about, what he looked like. Why? It's the claim that we are talking about a fact, something new that entered into human history.

Another example of Christianity as a fact that resists interpretations or mere words is what happens in the Gospel, again the Gospel of John, with the excerpt on the man born blind. You know the story. It's a real story. There is this guy who has been cured by Jesus in a way which is, let me say, a bit weird. You can see the scandal of the flesh. Who is this guy who spits on the ground and picks up some mud and puts this mud on my eyes? Come on! We think it's a tale. It's not! How would you react? There is a point where this man had to broaden his reason. His categories in approaching this fact were—What is going on? Don't touch me! Why was it reasonable for him to accept this and to even follow what Jesus told him? Maybe he heard about the other healings and miracles of Jesus. He did not understand. It's easy for us to talk about it afterwards when we know what happens. Ha! Ha! There is a good ending! But it was not yet the case for the blind man. He puts down his categories for a moment and he follows. Why? He probably had enough reasons to follow. He knew that this guy was something else. So he follows and in the end he's healed. And the people question him. And here is an example that I would like to leave you with for Christianity as a fact. People are giving out different interpretations to explain this fact: What did he do to you? He's a sinner. No, he's not really the blind man. He was not really blind; he was faking it. You can read these things. Interpretations. The reductions which actually in the end kill the fact. What's the response of this simple man? At a certain point, they go and call his parents. Remember the gospel? "What do you say? What is the deal?" And the parents say, "Whoa! We don't want to deal with this! Ask him. He's an adult, right?" What's the response of the man born blind? It's very simple. He talks about a fact, something that happened to him. There is no reduction to word. He says, "I just know that I was blind and now I can see." Something happened that I cannot deny. This fact is the nature of the way Christianity started and the nature of the way Christianity continues today. Every other reduction is ultimately not completely human. Every other reduction is ultimately something that sooner or later will get your students to say, "Whoa! [as I said before] Do I really care? Can I really be convinced that this is what my heart is looking for?"

The second appeal that comes again through both the addresses of the Pope, not only Regensburg, and Giussani is that Christianity is totalizing. We are not talking about another hobby. We are not talking about, I play ping pong, you like cards, you like movies, and I am a Christian. Take your pick. It's funny, but sometimes we too, I speak about myself, I can think this way, and then in the end, the way I look at my work, the way I look at my free time, the way I conceive of my money, the way I...you name it. It's not really determined by this. Totalizing (again we don't have to be moralistic about this) is not the sum of many different things. So it's not about making an effort to add a little piece of my life to Christianity so today I'm a little more Christian than yesterday. In my experience these efforts are doomed to frustration. It's more the ontological conception. I cannot say that if God exists, it doesn't matter. But I have to say and to start from the simple truth that God is the truth of everything. I can forget about it, I can deny it, I can dislike it at times, but God is the meaning of everything.

A sentence that was made known to me by Fr. Giussani by Romano Guardini uses the analogy of love. It's like when you are in love with another person. It's not that you have the problem of creating a connection between everything you do and that person, but in everything you do, there is this ultimate

meaning and this ultimate echo, and this ultimate presence within you. You bring it with you. You cannot help it. Guardini, the way he puts it says, “In the experience of a great love, everything becomes an event in its own place, in its own environment.” In the experience of a great love, if we are really in love with a fact, if we really don’t deny it, like the man born blind. You might be smarter than I, you might have a better theory than I, but I cannot deny that I was blind and now I see. In this experience, everything becomes an event wherever I am. Think about this man the day after. Could he forget? Did he have the problem of saying, “Oh, today I would like to be more Christian.”? This presence that changed his life was with him, was determining the way he was dealing with everything.

The last thing that I would like to talk about is the important call that Pope John Paul II and now Pope Benedict keep making about culture, how Christianity has been kicked out of culture. If you think about history, the arts, or if you think about what makes culture today, it looks like Christianity is not there. Culture is the product of what Paul said in his challenge to Christians, “Judge everything and keep what is valuable.” And the big teaching of 2000 years of history is that what is valuable will reveal to you something about Christ because Christ is the truth. And so in encountering and without fear in comparing everything with anything, you will rediscover and re-conquer the truth of Christ as logos, which was the beginning—the logos incarnated.

Conclusion, very briefly, is that it all comes down, we can all boil this whole thing down by saying that so at the end we need to go back to the simple fact of Christianity. But where do I find this fact? Where can I bump into this person who healed the man born blind? If Christianity cannot be reduced to word, where is this flesh which finally corresponds to the totality of my heart? The response again is very simple. Where is this process of the promise, “I will be with you now and forever.”? Where is the incarnation kept alive? Alive! I bump into a living person. The response is very simple. It’s his body which is the Church, and in fact, the other big attack and the other big consequence of the reduction to a personalistic or subjectivistic approach is that there is no Church, or there are too many separated churches. The dimension of the community is fundamental, also from the cultural point of view. It’s amazing. On campus I go to daily mass at 12 noon. It’s amazing for me every day when I enter this chapel where there is also the blessed sacrament in a separate place, to see these other people, and then each one goes about his own business, and then I go and teach, I go and read, and people go to class, and so on. But this very dimension of the community like you are who you are and you keep your identity and there are other people around. It’s a call. A fact. It’s not the case that we brought up a couple of times the word “power” or “common mentality.” Whoever has the power, if they don’t like the Church, one of the first and main attacks they make on the Church is to the dimension of the community. It’s the Roman ditto: “Divide a tempra.”—Split them apart, and they will be too fragile, and you will rule. You will have it. You will hold the power. If we look at the history of the last hundred years, and with this I conclude, and the terrible regimes that destroyed so much, one of the first attacks on the Church, still today, still in some countries today, is an attack on the Church in its dimension of the community which is the body, which is this flesh, which is what allows everyone to rediscover as a fact the totality of the Christian claim which is the fact, the great announcement, the same good news that “the Word was made flesh,” and we cannot stay with the Word without flesh, without this body, without this community. Thank you.