



## **Religious Awareness in Modern Man**

Notes from Seminar on Christianity and Culture in the Works of Luigi Giussani  
Founder of Communion and Liberation  
*by Luca Grillo, Princeton University*

### **April 9, 2007 - Christianity at the Crossroads of Greek Reason and Jewish Tradition**

**Simmonds:** Good evening, and welcome to our lecture on "Christianity at the Crossroads of Greek Reason and Jewish Tradition," organized by Crossroads New York Cultural Center. Tonight's lecture is the first 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*. In this book, Fr. Giussani, whom some of you may know as the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement in the Catholic Church, offered a very lucid discussion on why some of the most important Christian words have become almost incomprehensible to modern culture. I quote from the Introduction to the book:

“The Religious Awareness of Modern Man” attempts, first of all, to identify in today's cultural and social situation those aspects that hamper an authentic religious awareness. Furthermore, it tries to outline what Christianity's attitude is in front of this fact. We live in a time in which what is called Christianity appears to be something both known and forgotten. Known because it has left so many traces in the history and education of peoples. Nevertheless forgotten, because the content of its message seems to be hardly relevant to the lives of most people.

In the book, Fr. Giussani traces the historical development that has led to our current situation. He identifies the root of the problem in rationalism, the tendency of modern western culture to reduce the scope of reason to its most abstract faculties. In his view, Western reason has progressively become atrophied and unable to recognize reality in its fullness. In particular, it is unable to recognize that reality presents itself to us as a sign pointing to an overarching Mystery, to which reason tends but can never exhaust. 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. I should add that Crossroads, which finds its inspiration in the teachings of Fr. Giussani, regards this theme of the relationship between faith and culture as the very heart of our mission as a cultural center.

In order to explore these important questions, Crossroads has invited an outstanding speaker. Luca Grillo 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 welcome him here tonight.

**Grillo:** Thank you, Rita, and thank you everyone for coming. I'll start with a funny story. Hephestus, the smith of the gods, has a terrible feeling. He's afraid that his wife, Aphrodite, the goddess of love, may be cheating on him with Ares, the god of war, and so he decides to recur to his cunning arts and thanks to his device, he builds little, very subtle, invisible chains which are like a trap, and he puts this trap around the bed in the chamber.

And of course, Ares meets Aphrodite and they end up going to sleep together, and then all of a sudden the device shuts them in. At this point Hephestus got what he wanted, the proof of his worst suspicions. He calls all the gods into the room and he points at what's going on saying, "Look at this! My wife is cheating on me with Ares. It's unfair!" And the gods laugh, of course. And at the peak of the scene, Apollo sarcastically remarks to his friend who is not less sarcastic, Hermes, the messenger of the gods. He says, "Well, it's not such a bad punishment to end up trapped in bed with Aphrodite!" And everyone laughs and the story is over.

When we read this today as Homer tells the story, we are probably a little bit shocked. What are we talking about? Who are these gods? And it would be shocking also to find similar stories with very similar immoral behavior are told from different cultures all over around the Mediterranean Sea. But there is one big difference which is peculiarly Greek in this story and it's the fact that Greeks pretty soon came to criticize this story and to criticize these gods. And they said, "Well, this is mythology. This cannot be. This is not true, and these are not the real gods we believe in."

A couple of centuries after Homer, a philosopher called Xenophanes commented, probably thinking about the scene I started with, in this way, "Homer [who told the story] and Hesiod attributed to the gods everything which is shameful and blameworthy. They told of unacceptable stories of every possible misdeed of the gods like to steal, to sleep around, and to cheat." This judgment comes from within the Greek culture from a completely different point of view and this is the point of view which was brought forth from philosophy, and this would also be the first point that I would like to address in my talk. I will divide it into two different parts: The first part is meant to document a statement that Rita mentioned in the Regensburg address of Benedict XVI which is the following (it comes from that speech). He speaks about "the encounter between the faith of the Bible and the search of the Greeks as decisive for the birth and the spreading of Christianity." So the first part of my lecture will be an attempt to illustrate this encounter as fundamental for the formation and the spreading of Christianity. In the second part, I will talk about the profound harmony between what is Greek, in the best sense of the word, and the Biblical understanding of faith in God. There are of course differences, but there are also similarities, to quote Pope Benedict, "the profound harmony." And on this basis, on these pillars, Christianity was born. I would like to show these two trajectories of Jewish and Greek tradition, and to see how they came to an encounter.

First, the Greeks. The Greeks and their philosophy means their search, their rational search for meaning, if you will, for what constitutes everything in reality, or to put it another way, as they did—search for the origin, for God. You may know that philosophy was started from the passion that different people had around the seventh-sixth century B.C. for discovering the *arche*. The *arche* means the beginning, the origin. So they were fascinated by the possibility of realizing what came before, what was at the origin. These *arche* they called God. *Arche* is not only before in chronological terms, but it's also the substance from which everything is made, so really, in a word it's God—the consistency, the ultimate matter of everything, of reality.

There was an interesting coherence, again to put it with Pope Benedict, in the whole universe of reason. Reason was the main tool that everyone as a human being is given in order to attempt the fascinating adventure of knowledge, of discovering, of understanding reality, of understanding different things, of understanding myself, of looking for the meaning and searching for this God and the *arche*.

If you look at the early philosophers, and also people who came a little afterwards like Plato and Aristotle, it's striking to see how many completely different interests they had and how many disciplines they started and somehow founded. They were interested in biology, they were interested in psychology, they were interested in politics, oratory, history, philosophy; they were interested in metaphysics. What do all these areas have in common? The discovery of *Logos*, reason—this powerful energy everyone is given to search and to engage in reality. Different aspects of reality suggest different methods to the same tool—logos, reason.

But there is more. The Greeks pretty soon realized that there are different aspects, and different aspects found different disciplines. But there is also sort of a hierarchical order. One thing is to discover something about biology or mathematics or physics. One thing more compelling and more urgent is to discover the meaning of your life, or to discover God. And so they put an order on the different sciences naming and claiming metaphysics, which means “what goes beyond what is physical,” as the queen of all the sciences, which is the origin of theology, the search for God.

There is an interesting statement, and there's an interesting conclusion to this development and this trajectory—that different philosophers designed in their attempt to discover the origin, God, and the meaning of everything, and it could be somehow disappointing because the Greeks came to realize that there's nothing we've been given better than reason to attempt this inquiry, but, alas, reason may realize and surrender in its noble attempt, may realize that the very God which by nature I want to search for might be bigger, and I could come upon the realization that the very reason that drags me and pulls me towards the discovery of the great mystery is small and it's not big enough to contain this mystery. For the Greeks, to step over the border of what was allowed to human beings was the worst possible sin. It was called *hybris*. If you are a human being, do not dare conceive thoughts or attempt actions which are possible, permitted only to the gods. A lot of Greek tragedy plays on this very contrast—this attempt to reach and to embrace this infinite God and arche, and the fact that the tool that's been given seems to fall short of the task.

One of the greatest philosophers ever in the history of humanity, Plato, puts what I'm saying in the following way. And I have to say that this quote became known and dear to me because when I was a student in college, an undergraduate, Fr. Giussani used to quote it a lot. It goes like this (It's towards the end of the *Phaedo*):

I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters [the meaning of life] in this life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. [It's hard, it's uncertain, but you cannot give up. You must try.] For he must do one of two things; either he must learn or discover the truth about these matters, or if that is impossible, he must take whatever human doctrine is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking upon it as upon a raft, sail upon it through life in the midst of dangers, unless he can sail...[“unless”—not only two possibilities; maybe there is a third one.]...unless he can sail upon some stronger vessel, some divine revelation, and make his voyage more safely and securely . . . . .

Four hundred years before Christianity - the announcement that God came -, prophetically in a way, and maybe almost nostalgically, Plato conceived of the possibility that in this search to reach and to grasp and to understand God, God might actually have pity on human beings and He Himself might come to rescue us from this hard task.

There is this incredible awareness that there is nothing more precious and more useful that we are given than reason, as I said, but reason, as I said, might not be enough.

In the funeral oration in the year 429, after the first year of the hostilities between Athens and Sparta, the most prominent statesman of the time, Pericles, was chosen democratically by the citizens to deliver the oration, to praise the ones who fell during the first season of the war. He transformed this oration in an occasion to praise the greatness and the value of Athens to its full. And instead of being an occasion of mourning, it became an occasion of incredible pride, also in a healthy sense. Basically he said, “It is true; they died, but look, what did they die for? What was the ideal that they held until the end of their life?” Which is like saying, what is the country they gave their life for? And he responds, he says, “Who are we?” There are two little phrases which always strike me. One thing he says, “philokaloumen,” which means, “we love beauty.” So it’s the idea of reason as the complete openness to a reality and the capability to recognize what it’s built for, what it’s worth is. And the other thing that he says is, “philosophoumen,”—we love philosophy – meaning, we love reason. We will engage in reality banking on our reason.

But there is a problem. Pericles is clearly talking to Athenians and for Athenians. What he’s saying is limited, almost opposed to everyone else. It’s true for the Athenians, actually, only for free males, born of Athenian parents. It’s what makes Athenians different from everyone else.

There is a passage which Benedict, in the Regensburg address, underlines as very important, which is the passage of Hellenism which is the time when Greek philosophy crossed the borders of Athens, and pervaded the whole of Greece, and through Greece pervaded the Roman Empire, and through the Roman Empire basically pervaded the whole Mediterranean Sea. And all of the sudden logos, reason, this instrument and this tool that we’ve been given for this search became a characteristic and a property of every person, so much so that based on the categories of Greek philosophy I can say that for each of us in this room, even if I never met you before, I know for a fact, by the very fact that we are human beings, I know for a fact that you, your heart, the way you are is this thirst for beauty, and that you want justice and you want truth and you want meaning for your life. Why? Why is it true for you? And why is it true for me? How can I say that? Greek philosophers responded to this question, and responded using their reason. And I can say also that we all have the ultimate desire that Plato had. And if there were other possibilities in my daily struggles, as I’m looking to be happy in a simple way, and if the other possibility is that the happiness that I’m running after may come and reach me, Plato before Christ, and us today have the same passion. This, through this Hellenization of these ideas and conceptions which were born and limited to Athens, came to spread out and also to meet a good part and the best part of the Jewish tradition.

In the second part of my first point, I will speak briefly, very briefly of the Jewish tradition. And I would like to underline a couple of characteristics of the God of the Bible. I will use examples which are probably already well known to you. I will just recall them to your attention.

The first characteristic that I think pops out on pretty much every page reading the Bible, the Old Testament, is that God is absolute, is infinite, is this ultimate mystery. You cannot even almost mention God. And even Moses used to veil his face when he met God because no one can see God. We can say that God is somehow transcendent. He is up there. But God is also present. God chose a people and He decided to become part of their history. And this people, as we all know, are the Hebrew people, the Jewish people. And the very

characteristic of this people, what makes them different from everyone else is that they have this covenant, the covenant that God established with them.

It's interesting because if God is infinite and absolute but present, to read the Bible many times from my point of view, from my perception as a human being, a God which is absolute but a God that is present manifests Himself as a scandal. My reason recognizes Him, but He's so much bigger that it scandalizes me. It's great. I like it personally to read the Bible catching these very human reactions to God's interventions in human history.

Let me mention a few examples. Isn't it unfair, we would say, using purely human categories, to ask Abraham, who waited many long years to have a son and in the end who had a son, to ask him to sacrifice him? And Abraham probably had this hard dialogue with his wife Sarah, but he was the loyal servant of God and so he picked up his son and he went up the mountain and he laid him down on the altar and God stopped his hand. Nonetheless, what does it mean? It's almost as if God is inviting him to stretch his reason. Even if it sounds crazy to you, that's what I'm asking you. And at the end there is the great mercy; He stopped his hand.

Another example, again very well known. Isn't it crazy, again unfair, that He chose for a leader to guide the people out of the captivity of Egypt, Moses? Moses, as we know, stuttered. He couldn't speak straight. "And n-n-now I have to go t-t-to Pha-Pha-Pha Pharaoh. And I have to talk!" And for the ancient people, the way you talk is the way you present yourself. And He picked Moses. Every time God intervenes it's like He's inviting His people to acknowledge that their strength is in Him.

A couple more examples, taken this time, because it's the same God and the same trajectory, taken from Christian history. We are used to hearing these stories as nice stories. We don't think about it anymore, but sorry, wait a minute! Isn't it a scandal, literally a scandal, to decide to enter again into human history by getting a teenager pregnant? This is what God did, and once again, if you stop a moment and you think about it, it's unfair. You don't do that! Or isn't it, once again, unfair, you could say, or a scandal for human measure to decide to save the world by putting your son on the cross? We just went through Easter. What does it mean? These are just little examples from the point of view of our experience of God that God is present, He gets involved with our life, but it remains somehow unintelligible, even if when I have an experience of Him, it's more. I cannot put God into a box, and my very reason that drives me to know Him has taught me that once I meet Him, it's more.

The second characteristic is that there is this incredible loyalty of God within the covenant. Another incredible thing that I always like to catch when I read the Bible is that the loyalty is God's loyalty. We as human beings break the covenant continuously. What keeps the covenant going—and for Christians it's pretty much the same—is the fact that God is loyal and God keeps it and God re-establishes this relationship and confirms His choice.

If we put together what we were saying about the Greeks looking for this mystery, and realizing that reason could be shared (because we all have the same logos), and, on the other hand, the Jewish people, the Hebrew people who had this covenant with God, we could start understanding how two different paths sort of met in the middle and how the very reason that moved the Greeks became the tool for recognizing an openness "philokaloumen"—we love beauty, we are struck by reality, became the tool to recognize and understand this *arche* that the Greeks were looking for and that reached the people of the Bible.

And now I'm moving to my second point. I'm going to touch on the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the Biblical understanding of faith in God.

First, this God is a God that is transcendent, it's true, but that not only can but wants to be searched for and recognized by human reason. It's true for the Greeks so much so that philosophy makes sense. It's true for the people of the Bible, and it's true for the Christians. It is true that God is more, and it could be perceived by my experience, by my narrow categories, as a scandal. But my reason, God wants to be recognized by my reason. Think how many times later in the Gospel Jesus said, "You still don't understand! You still don't understand!" And the relationship between the God of the Bible and the Hebrew people is the same.

I remember in college one of the drawings that Giussani used to make to help us was the following. So I'll do the same. He was saying, imagine a big playing field, and imagine in this field different people, single people, or different teams, groups of people trying each one by himself, or by themselves, to build a huge bridge to the stars, like a poetic image for a huge bridge to the mystery, to our God. Can I establish a connection with this God, this unknown mystery that I'm looking for? And imagine that they're all trying and everyone is using his or her or their skills as best they can. Probably in this example we have to say that the best ones who are trying to build this bridge were the Greeks because they relied on the best tool which is reason. And they could say something about this God and about the ways to possibly reach Him better than anyone else. These are the Greeks. So they were trying from the plain on the land to reach, as other people did, like this big "X", this big mystery. What happened, on the other hand, is that this mystery became involved with certain people, and these people were the people of the covenant, the people of the Bible. Christianity, we could say, was met and was born at the crossroads, at the point of the encounter between this attempt to reach God and God becoming involved in human history.

This is true in different ways. It's true in this sense and it's true also, very simply, for time and space. When did God decide to enter, to become incarnate in human history? In a precise moment. 2007 years ago. When the Greek culture, thanks also to the Roman Empire, was dominating all over the Empire, which means that this understanding and this drive of reason was particularly clear and evident. And everyone was trying to adopt the same categories to use the same tool to discover the same thing—the *arche*, God.

Where did it happen? What was the place where God chose to keep his covenant and fulfill His revelation becoming involved with human beings? It was Palestine which was part of the Roman Empire and certainly part of the Greek culture, again thanks to the Roman Empire that spread it. So, from the point of view of the trajectory of Greek thought, from the point of view of God becoming involved with history, from the point of view of time and space, literally Christianity was born of this foundation.

Let me give, as a sort of an introduction, and then we will develop this in the next lecture which is actually the birth of Christianity on these pillars, let me show you how the early Christians were aware of this dynamic that I've been mentioning. Christianity was founded upon these two pillars: Greek thought and the history of the covenant. The very first line, it's very famous and also very beautiful—the very first line of the Gospel of John goes like this: "En arche en ho logos," which means, "In the beginning [en arche] there was the logos," *verbum*, the Latins will translate, which is reason, or which is God. It's not very clear at the beginning what he's actually talking about. But then the good news comes. The logos—*ho logos sarx egeneto*—"the logos became flesh." It's the incarnation.

It's interesting to look at the vocabulary because this line paraphrases the first line of the Bible, so connecting the Gospel of John and the beginning of Christianity to the beginning of the Bible. The first line of the Bible is "In the beginning was God." God now is called "logos" which is like saying it's a God that can be known and searched for according to the categories and the foundations of Greek philosophy. And then there is the other great news that this God, according to the history of the covenant, kept getting involved with His people, and He became flesh.

Another little curious thing, I read toward the beginning the quote from Plato saying that there are two possibilities—find your way or stick with the best. Oops! Maybe there's also a secret dream, a third possibility – that God Himself may come. The expression of Plato when he says that we could rely on a divine revelation is "tinos logos," so literally Christianity was like the fulfillment of the secret desire of the Greeks and the fulfillment of the history of the covenant that characterizes and drives like a thread all over through the Bible. Thank you.