

“The Religious Sense” and American Culture

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American religion has developed a relation to God that is without mind (fideism, pietism) and, therefore, a mind that is without real relation to God (atheism, mostly implicit).

Commenting on the cultural situation of the Anglo-Saxon world, the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre once remarked that,

[Our] difficulty lies in the combination of atheism in the practice of the life of the vast majority, with the profession of either superstition or theism by that same majority. The creed of the English is that there is no God and that it is wise to pray to him from time to time.¹

Luigi Giussani’s account of “the religious sense,” set forth in his book of the same title, helps us to see that this is the creed not only of the English but of Americans as well. Indeed, I believe the book’s significance lies above all in its exposure of atheism—or, to put it in positive terms, the “religious sense”—as the fundamental cultural issue of our time.

Now the most obvious objection to any suggestion that America’s fundamental cultural issue is atheism, or the lack of religion, is that it appears to run up against the facts. And so we need to set an American context for Giussani’s argument.

¹A. MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 26.

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My proposal is that atheism is a phenomenon affecting the lives of the vast majority of Americans; and that the theism characteristic of the lives of that same majority does not so much contradict atheism as coincide with it and indeed lend it support. The purpose of this paper is to say a word about how this is so, and about the meaning and significance of Giussani's proposal in light of this.

Regarding the religiosity of Americans, the positive evidence seems abundant. Wendy Kaminer, for example, writing in *The New Republic* in 1996, insisted that the problem in America is not too little religion but too much—that what America in fact needs is *more* atheism, because of the anti-intellectual habits bred by religion.² Kaminer cites the statistics with which we are all familiar: 95% of Americans profess belief in God or some universal spirit, and 76% imagine God as a heavenly father who actually pays attention to their prayers. Catholic sociologist Andrew Greeley, echoing many others on all sides of the religious spectrum, interprets the same polling data positively, arguing that the history of American culture refutes the conventional wisdom that modernization inevitably leads to secularization. In fact, says Greeley, in some countries, like “the United States [and Ireland], religious devotion may be higher than it has ever been in human history.”³ George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli, in their book on *The People's Religion*, state that “the baseline of religious beliefs [in America] is remarkably high—certainly, the highest of any developed nation in the world.”⁴ And *The New York Times Magazine*, recording the same figure of more than 95% professing belief in God, reported a year ago that, statistically, Americans remains one of the most religious peoples on earth.

Many who hold this (empirical or sociological) view that religion is thriving in America tend as a consequence to “regionalize” the phenomenon of unbelief, restricting it mostly to a certain sector of our society, such as the educational, journalistic, and political elite—for example, what has been called by Peter Berger the “new knowledge class.” For this first group of thinkers, in short, atheism (or secularism: I leave the two terms undifferentiated, for reasons that will become clear later) in America is not a pervasive phenomenon, but is limited to the secular elites who contrast sharply with the mostly religious masses.

Now MacIntyre's statement quoted at the outset hardly disputes the existence of widespread belief in God; on the contrary, that is what it affirms. But of course it does so in a paradoxical way that requires explanation. The paradox is not unlike that focused by Will Herberg in his classic *Protestant Catholic Jew* of the mid-1950s. As is well-known, Herberg argues that the peculiarity of America's religious situation consists in the

²W. Kaminer, “The Last Taboo,” *The New Republic*, October 14, 1996.

³Cited in Thomas C. Reeves, “Not So Christian America,” *First Things* (October 1996): 16–21, at 17.

⁴G. Gallup, Jr., and S. Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90s* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1989), 20.

fact that religion and secularism are basically two sides of the same coin. Coincident with its intentional sincerity and moral generosity, the religion of Americans contains within it a largely unconscious logical framework consisting of notions of the self, of human being and action, drawn mostly from Post-Enlightenment, democratic-capitalist institutions. Herberg summarized the coincidence of religion and secularism in terms of what he called "secularized Puritanism" or "the American Way of Life."⁵

The same paradoxical coincidence of religion and atheism is made clear in the larger context of modern culture by another thinker, Friedrich Nietzsche. Recognizing widespread profession of belief and indeed relatively full churches, Nietzsche insisted nonetheless that God was dead. Provoking much laughter as he ran into the marketplace crying "I seek God! I seek God," and asking "Whither is God?," Nietzsche's madman answers his own question: "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. . . . What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? . . . Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? . . . Do we smell nothing as yet of the divine decomposition? . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him."⁶

Theologian Michael Buckley rightly points out in his comment on this passage that "the difference between the Madman and the market crowds was not that one believed in the reality of god and the other did not. Neither believed, and god died in the event of his own incredibility."⁷ But the madman alone knows what they have done and what they have lost. Nietzsche, then, is not really surprised by the crowds' laughter: "The event [of God's death] is far too great," he says, "too distant, too remote from the multitude's capacity for comprehension even for the tidings of it to be thought of as having *arrived* yet. Much less may one suppose that many people know as yet *what* this event really means—and how much must collapse now that this faith has been undermined because it was built upon this faith, propped up by it, grown into it; for example, the whole of our European morality" (*GS*, n. 343).

The death of God does not imply for Nietzsche that the market crowds were evil. Such a moralistic simplification misses Nietzsche's subtlety. Indeed, as he says in *The Will to Power*, "corruption is not the *cause* of the advent of nihilism [nihilism: cf. "straying as through an infinite nothing"]. Ours [in fact] is the most decent and compassionate age" (Book I, 1).

We can summarize the distinctiveness of modern atheism, then, in the words of Buckley:

⁵Will Herberg, *Protestant Catholic Jew* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

⁶F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (=GS), n. 125.

⁷M. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 29. Cf. *GS*, 343: "The greatest recent event—that 'God is dead', that the belief in the Christian god has become unbelievable—is already beginning to cast its shadow over Europe."

What began in the Paris of the Enlightenment has become a religious phenomenon which Western civilization has never witnessed before. It is critical to notice the historical uniqueness of the contemporary experience: the rise of a radical godlessness which is as much a part of the consciousness of millions of ordinary human beings as it is the persuasion of the intellectual. Atheisms have existed before, but there is a novelty, a distinctiveness about the contemporary denial of God both in its extent and in its cultural establishment. The recent judgment of John Paul II coincides with [the judgment of those who insist that our culture is characteristically “the age of atheism”]: “Atheism is without doubt one of the major phenomena and, it is necessary to say, the spiritual drama of our time.”⁸

It is beyond our purposes to sort out the differences among authors like MacIntyre, Herberg, Buckley, and indeed Nietzsche on the issue before us. I wish only to suggest, in light of their arguments, that the claim of an atheism present throughout all sectors of society does not entail a denial that religion is also, in some obvious sense, thriving in those same sectors. On the contrary, all four authors show the possibility of affirming the near coincidence of atheism and theism.

My first contention, then, is that this is the case in contemporary America; that the difference between our two groups of authors, accordingly, turns in the first instance not on the *fact* of a widespread, indeed almost pervasive, profession of religious belief in America—which neither group disputes—but rather on their divergent understandings of what suffices as an authentic religiosity, or as the integrity of “the religious sense.” The second group alone sees in America’s virtually omnipresent religion—I emphasize, sees already *in* this religion—the seeds of a-religion, the beginnings of God’s incredibility, of God’s death.

But it is crucial to understand properly what is meant by God’s death, and so I move on to my second proposal. As Buckley rightly insists, the modern death of God is not merely about God’s cultural disappearance, as if the content of belief in God, or of the idea of God, remains essentially healthy, and only the practice of religion is unsatisfactory—as if America is theoretically religious and only practically atheistic.⁹ Any such reading of the death of God blunts the seriousness of what is really at stake, for it is the idea of God itself—in this sense God himself—that has become unbelievable. It is the content of American religion itself that is already atheistic, and this content comprehends both theory and practice. What is peculiar about America’s religious situation, in a word, is not that Americans are theoretically theistic but fail practically to live up to their theism (which would in fact amount to a rather banal claim, since no one in the history of the world, save Jesus’s mother, Mary, has practiced completely faithfully what he or she has professed); rather, what is peculiar is that the theism practiced by Americans is already theoretically atheistic and they do not know it. Americans explicitly intend to practice religion faithfully even as this

⁸Ibid., 28.

⁹Whether this is the view implied in MacIntyre’s statement above need not be resolved here.

intention and practice are mediated implicitly by a theory of theism that already contains the seeds of atheism.

Thus my second contention regarding religion in America: America’s religious theory inclines toward atheism at the same time as it wills or intends the contrary. Now, to explain this proposal, we could draw further here (*inter alia*) on Buckley’s analysis of what may be called the Christian contribution to atheism in modern culture, on the arguments of Herberg regarding “the American Way of Life,” or indeed on elements of Max Weber’s classic study of the inversion of American Puritanism into a rationalized notion of worldly order and activity, and indeed into a kind of Pelagian consumerism.¹⁰ However, for present purposes I will draw mainly from the argument of James Tunstead Burtchaell in his recently published study of the history of Church-related higher education in America.¹¹

Burtchaell describes this history largely in terms of a gradual transfer of identity of Church-related colleges and universities from the church to nation and guild. But the theoretical core of Burtchaell’s argument as it affects our context is to be found in his summary claim that “[t]he critical turn of allegedly Christian colleges and universities in the United States has been a modern rerun of the degradation of an unstable pietism through liberal indifferentism into rationalism.”¹² Pietists thought that all those quarrels over the *homoousios* and *homoiousios*, Communion from the cup, predestination, and so on,

were unresolvable quarrels, because they could appeal to nothing stronger than unverifiable opinion. Thus the credibility vacuum created by pietism came naturally to be filled by rationalism, which proffered a more peaceable life by refusing to discuss anything beyond what could be resolved consensually by appeal to empirical evidence.

¹⁰Regarding Buckley: Buckley argues that, in order to defend the existence of God, Christian theologians in the modern period developed a philosophical apologetics that precluded any primary appeal to intrinsically religious experience or evidence. Thus, unwittingly and contrary to their own intentions, these theologians set in motion a process that led to false notions of God which eventually resolved themselves into a negation of God. Regarding Weber: Weber traces the inversion of the religious belief of American Puritans into a kind of rationalized notion of worldly activity. By virtue of their religious ideas of salvation and Church and sacrament—that is, by virtue of their fear of damnation coupled with their absence of a sacramental Church (e.g., no sacrament of penance)—the Puritans’ sense of “*Deus solus*” drifted of its own internal logic into a kind of Pelagian sense of human activity which over time took on a consumerist hue. On Weber, cf. my “Reorienting the Church on the Eve of the Millennium,” *Communio* 24 (Winter 1997): 728–73, at 762–65.

¹¹J. T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹²*Ibid.*, 843; “The Pietists propounded the primacy of spirit over letter, commitment over institution, affect over intellect . . . , invisible church over visible” (839). “So they begot piety . . . without theology, preaching without sacrament, community without order” (841). “People determined to persevere as Christians developed a liberal piety whose wisdom had to be framed so broadly as to lack all depth. It had all the pungency of a cliché” (841).

Rationalism . . . [.] out of little more than habit, . . . provided itself with Deism, the religious equivalent of safe sex. . . . For those who liked their Deism in costume, there was Freemasonry. . . .¹³

Burtchaell's point is nicely summarized when he writes that,

[r]eligion's move to the academic periphery was not so much the work of godless intellectuals as of pious educators who, since the onset of pietism, had seen religion as embodied so uniquely in the personal profession of faith that it could not be seen to have a stake in social learning. The radical disjunction between divine knowledge and human knowledge had been central to classical Reformation thinking, and its unintended outcome was to sequester religious piety from secular learning. The older, pre-Reformation view, that faith was goaded by revelation to seek further understanding, and that learning itself could be an act of piety—indeed, the form of piety proper to a college or university—succumbed to the view that worship and moral behavior were to be the defining acts of a Christian academic fellowship. Later, worship and moral behavior were easily set aside because no one could imagine they had anything to do with learning (842).¹⁴

The heart of Burtchaell's argument is thus that an understanding of Christianity that separates divine knowledge from human knowledge leads to a disjunction between the realms of piety and knowledge which in turn invariably paves the road for a secularistic reduction of knowledge: pietism, in short, inverts inevitably into rationalism. My contention is that it is just this dualism between divine and human knowledge, and in turn between piety and knowledge, that undergirds and most adequately explains America's coincidence of theism and atheism: the pietistic will (voluntarism) making up America's religion inverts into and indeed continues to coexist peacefully with the rationalized intelligence (mechanism) which lies at the heart of America's a-religion. Pietistic religion or explicitly theistic will, in short, gives rise to implicitly a-theistic intelligence and order.

Thus, if I may anticipate the terms of Giussani, the subjectivist-sentimentalist-pietist reduction of Christianity eases the cultural slide into (naturalism and) rationalism—that is, into the primacy of Power—which makes up the content of what Giussani calls *de facto*, or “constructed” (i.e., artificial) atheism.¹⁵

But, before taking up discussion of Giussani's analysis of religion, it is important to add a clarification here, which consists in a friendly amendment to Burtchaell's lengthy and convincing argument. Burtchaell rightly notes how the “radical disjunction between divine knowledge and human knowledge had been central to classical Reformation thinking, and [how] its unintended outcome was to sequester religious piety from secular learning.”¹⁶ At the same time, he says that Catholics entered within the

¹³Ibid., 841–42.

¹⁴Ibid., 842.

¹⁵See Luigi Giussani, “The Religious Awareness of Modern Man” (=RAMM), *Communio* 25 (Spring 1998): 104–140, at 115, 129.

¹⁶J. T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*, 842.

ambit of pietism and onto the road to rationalism beginning mostly in the 1960s, due to the crises following the Second Vatican Council.¹⁷ Notable in Burtchaell's account, therefore, is how the Protestant entry into pietism has a significant theological origin, whereas the Catholic entry seems much more cultural and indeed motivational in nature: the result mostly of fallout from the Council. It seems to me crucial to see that the dualism between pietistic religion and rationalized intelligence undergirding America's distinctive coincidence of theism and atheism has a significant theological tradition in Catholicism as well. Otherwise, the problem identified by Burtchaell is likely to be construed, as it affects Catholics, as a matter mostly of "restoring" the historical-cultural conditions prevalent in American Catholic academies prior to the Council. I do not mean to imply that Burtchaell would necessarily disagree with what I am proposing here, but only that he himself does not really address the issue of pre-conciliar Catholic dualism as it pertains to his overall argument.

Evidently, the story of the development of this dualism in Catholic theology is a long and complicated one, which cannot be fully rehearsed in the present forum. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has insisted, the split between theology and sanctity, or again between dogmatic theology and "Christian piety," is of fundamental importance for a proper reading of our contemporary situation.¹⁸ This dualism of theology and piety had its origin already in the pre-Reformation period, in the emergence of philosophy as a separate discipline alongside theology. (Indeed, it could be argued that this bifurcation of theology and piety helped to prepare the way for the Reformation itself: but that is for discussion elsewhere.)

For Balthasar, it is not at all the case that the philosophical concept of truth did not have a certain legitimacy in its own sphere. The difficulties began to emerge when the "philosophical propaedeutic came to be considered a fixed and unalterable basis, whose concepts, without the necessary transposition, were used as norms and criteria of the content of faith, and therefore set in judgment over it. Teachers [began to behave] as though man knew from the outset, before he had been given revelation, knew with some sort of finality what truth, goodness, being, light, love and faith were. It was as though divine revelation on these realities had to accommodate itself to these fixed philosophical concepts of philosophy and their content, before going on to their application in theology."¹⁹

¹⁷Ibid. 705–71.

¹⁸See Balthasar, "Theology and Sanctity," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 181–209. Balthasar notes how the dualism indicated here is linked with several dualisms characteristic of modern thought: "between spirit and life, between the theoretical and practical reason, between Apollo and Dionysus, idea and existence, between [a] conception of the spiritual world as valuable but impotent, and of the practical world as one of power but spiritual poverty," (193–94).

¹⁹Ibid., 186. Again, this does not mean that philosophical truth does not have its own natural integrity. It means only that philosophy's (methodological) abstraction from theology—the light of faith—can never proceed in a neutral fashion relative to the fact

Thus there emerged a double movement: a separation of philosophy from theology (dualism), coincident with what then became the pressure to reduce theological truth to philosophical truth (rationalism).²⁰

In any event, it was the epoch following Bonaventure and Thomas, says Balthasar, that saw the completion of the split between theology and spirituality. “Spiritual men were turned away from a theology which was overlaid with secular philosophy—with the result that alongside dogmatic theology, meaning always the central science which consists in the exposition of revealed truth, there came into being a new science of the ‘Christian life,’ one derived from the mysticism of the Middle Ages and achieving independence in the *devotio moderna*.”²¹

Thus, in sum, according to Balthasar, modern Catholic thought developed too much under the influence of a double extrinsicism: between the order of nature and the order of revelation; and between the true and the good. This double extrinsicism had fractured the unity of knowledge and life required by Catholic faith itself, resulting in formalistic intelligence and voluntaristic piety. As the great Thomist historian of philosophy, Etienne Gilson, put it, “a flat rationalism that fits every kind of deism” grew up in modern Catholic thought which succeeded in pushing mystery and the life of faith to the margins of intelligent order.²²

The point, then, is that there is a Catholic version of the problem described by Burtchaell. Catholics as well Protestants have participated in the dualism between piety and knowledge, or in the religious positivism (positivism: extrinsicism between the orders of nature and revelation), which spawns America’s distinctive atheism. To be sure, Protestant and Catholic “pietisms” took on very different forms: for example, a tendency toward biblical positivism on the one hand vs. a tendency toward magisterial positivism on the other. My point is simply that there was a tradition showing an intrinsic link between “pietism” and rationalism also in the Catholic intellectual tradition.

I conclude my argument regarding the religious situation in America then, by defining America’s religion, or indeed its coincidence of theism and atheism, with the following summary:

America’s religion is essentially positivistic, by which I mean that its doubtless sincere piety carries a de facto relegation of God to the margins of intelligent order. Against the background of a double dualism between nature and the trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ, and, within nature itself, between the orders of being and truth on the one hand and love on the

that nature is created in the image of the concrete trinitarian God revealed in Jesus Christ, and that nature and reason have been wounded by sin. Pope John Paul II’s recent encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, provides a rich discussion of these issues.

²⁰Ibid., 180.

²¹Ibid., 187.

²²Evidently, there is much detail and nuance that needs to be added to this brief overview of the Catholic problematic, but this suffices for the present context.

other, American religion has developed a relation to God that is without mind (fideism, pietism) and, therefore, a mind that is without real relation to God (atheism, mostly implicit). But this divorce between the mind and the life of the spirit that is the essence of what I am calling positivism entails, in turn, a reduction of intelligent order—including the order of civilization and culture—to the relations of power manifest in a machine, and of love to what now becomes simply voluntaristic—or arbitrary—movement. In technical theological terms, intelligent order within a positivistic framework is best defined as an ontological “pelagianism” and “nominalism,” according to which being and knowing are made up of relations (between creatures and God, among creatures) that are primarily external in nature and most basically power-driven (Bacon: “knowledge is power”).

My proposal, in sum, is that religion in America, because and insofar as it is positivistic and voluntaristic in nature, reveals—in ways evidenced in abundance by Burtchaell—an inversion into what is, *de facto*, an a-theistic mind and, consequently, an a-theistic cultural order.

II.

I have described the American religious situation at some length because I believe that it highlights the significance of Giussani’s account of the religious sense and, at the same time, suggests where controversy is most likely to emerge in any American engagement with that account. With the foregoing sketch of this situation in hand, let us turn to Giussani’s
p r o p o s a l .

To go directly to the heart of the matter, Giussani says, in words taken from Romano Guardini, that, “In the experience of a great love, all that happens becomes an event inside that love.” These words provide the proper context for understanding Giussani’s insistence on the “totalizing” nature of the religious sense, which he considers the latter’s most relevant and indeed most profound feature. The religious sense is “totalizing” because the creature’s relation to God, which is constitutive of the creature’s being, affects all things at all times and from the depths of what they are. God, in other words, is not relevant only at discrete moments when, say, he engages our will or affections (pietism and voluntarism), but always affects the *meaning* of everything from top to bottom, thereby ruling out any cession of intelligent order in the cosmos or in culture to the “pelagian” and “nominalistic” mind of rationalism.

Giussani’s insistence on the “totalizing” nature of the infinite thus cuts to the core of what I have been calling religious positivism. It helps us to *see* this positivism and, at the same time, exposes its (implicit) atheism. It suggests, in fact, that any religiosity whose God does *not* affect the basic meaning and order of being is just so far atheistic, since a God who does not affect everything all the time is finite, and a finite God is in the end no

God at all.²³ But in perceiving the atheism implicit in America's positivist religiosity, we also see the roots of a profound anthropological crisis. Since only the "totalizing" infinite can give creatures their own center and their integrity, creatures, outside of a realized encounter with God at the heart of everything, lose the center, become fragmented, and remain floating on the surface of things. At stake in any recovery of "totalizing" relation to the infinite in the context of America's implicit atheism is nothing less than the integrity of the creature as such.

The meaning and significance of Giussani's claim here are thus perhaps best understood in light of what Pope John Paul II has stated is likely the most important teaching of the Second Vatican Council: the integration of theology (trinitarian christology) and anthropology summed up especially well in *Gaudium et Spes*, 22, which reads, "in his very revelation of the Father and his love, Jesus Christ reveals man to himself."²⁴ Later in the same paragraph 22, the pope stresses that human nature is assumed and not absorbed by its union with the divine nature in Jesus Christ. But what this assumption—rightly interpreted—implies is that human nature is now revealed in its fullest integrity, *precisely as human nature*, in Jesus Christ, and hence in turn in the *communio sanctorum*. And if the integration of the divine with human nature does not reduce or suppress the latter but on the contrary releases it into its deepest integrity, precisely as human, then this integration alone permits human nature and activity its rightful distinctness or "legitimate autonomy."²⁵

So far, I have argued that it is only such an *integration* of the divine or the supernatural and the human, of theology and anthropology, to which Giussani's religious sense gives profound expression, that permits us to go to the root of the problem of our peculiarly American atheism. But of course it is just this claim of "totality" or integration that is most likely to arouse the most strenuous objections, given America's religious tendencies delineated earlier. The question that will be asked, in other words, is how Giussani's emphasis on integration can avoid becoming "integralist," and hence in turn also "sectarian."

Here I can only suggest the direction of a response. Properly understood, integralism is a program for effecting a (religious) unity or wholeness arbitrarily and through relations of power. Such an integration

²³Giussani explains: "If a God who became one of us . . . did not tend to shape our every thought, plan, and sentiment, if he were not understood in this all-embracing way, he would cease to be God" (*RAMM*, 137). Giussani insists that "totalizing" involves neither a theological reduction nor the claim that the Gospel provides "a ready-made formula for every last detail of life" (*RAMM*, 137). It nonetheless does imply "the radical transformation of every last detail of life through the total engagement of a subject who dwells in the atmosphere of a perturbing fact. Faith impacts on the subject, and in changing him it tends to change every detail of his existence" (*RAMM*, 137).

²⁴Cf. also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1701–1702, regarding the primary content of the creaturely *imago Dei*.

²⁵*Gaudium et Spes*, 36, 59.

will by definition exclude those who do not share the same arbitrary relation to God: integralism is the progenitor of sectarianism. Now, such a unity is rightly experienced as one that does not resonate with my deepest being, but instead is imposed arbitrarily and from the outside, as it were. Insofar as nature and culture are presumed to function (logically) on their own, in abstraction from God, any attempt to bring religion into their inner workings, any dynamic for integration, will be understood to be what it now is—and logically must be—given such abstraction from God, namely, an imposition of arbitrary unity: integralism.

The point I wish to make here should be obvious. Religious integration reduces to integralism and sectarianism only on the basis of a prior assumption—conscious or unconscious—of a positivist conception of religion, such as we have said has prevailed in America. Any charge that Giussani's religious sense is in principle integralist, in other words, presupposes just the religious positivism which it is the burden of that religious sense to challenge and which alone finally makes integralism possible. (Note that both integralists and anti-integralists can and generally do share this positivist presupposition. Those who wish to integrate religion into life, and who do not break cleanly with religious positivism, will invariably fall into integralism. But those who wish to keep religion out of life, on the assumption that integration in principle entails integralism, just so far presuppose—from the opposite direction—the same religious positivism as the integralists.)²⁶

My point, in sum, is that Giussani's religious sense indicates neither integralism nor sectarianism but the opposite of these. Indeed, only something like Giussani's sense of religion will enable us, while avoiding the integralism and sectarianism that are the risk of all positivistic religion, to foster instead the genuine integrity of the human. For only something like Giussani's sense of religion presupposes a religious wholeness that already "comprehends"—grounding, securing, and informing—the integrity of creaturely nature and freedom.

III.

I will now move on to note quickly what seem to me some of the main features of Giussani's proposal, in light of the American situation as

²⁶It is instructive here to note the contrast between Giussani's view and that of some strands of evangelical Christianity in America which seek to penetrate human culture with the religious sense, *but which do so all the while continuing to assume the dominant positivism of American religious history*. These two contrasting modes of penetrating culture give rise to profoundly different sensibilities with regard to the integrity of the human—and consequently with respect to the nature of evangelization—which sensibilities we cannot discuss in detail in the present forum. Suffice it to say only, for example, that Giussani's approach entails a different inclusion of the moral within the "aesthetic"—within the beauty that is the most proper language of love.

I have described it. The list will of course be incomplete, both for reasons of space and because I will restrict myself mostly to *The Religious Sense* (=RS),²⁷ with help from his important article "The Religious Awareness of Modern Man."

Our basic question, in light of the foregoing discussion of integration, and indeed of America's religious horizon, is how the religious sense as understood by Giussani liberates the whole of the human in its integrity. What does this mean?

Of fundamental importance is that reason and freedom are now defined most profoundly in terms of their movement toward reality in the totality of its factors (RS, 12). Reason and freedom are best understood as capacities for the infinite, for the infinite God.

For Giussani, this means, on the one hand, that reason is opened up to mystery from its very core. The empiricist notion of reason prevalent in much of contemporary culture is revealed for what it is: a rationalist reduction of reason. (Indeed, the primacy accorded poll-taking in religious matters in the present situation is on Giussani's terms already an important sign of an attenuated religious sense!) On the other hand, Giussani's conception of freedom places the capacity for infinity, for God, anterior to, and therefore as the always-already intrinsic context for, freedom as a matter of choosing this or that.

Consequently, for Giussani reason and freedom, in their interrelation, are always dramatic and never neutral. They are never neutral because they always imply God, imply an engaged relation to God, which may be positive or negative but which remains in any case a relation. Passion is thus restored to the core of human life: that is, not as a moral but precisely as an ontological category, which means that man's capacity for God goes to the depth of his or her being and comprehends the orders of both reason and freedom. Here, then, we might ponder the implications of the non-neutrality of reason and freedom against the backdrop of the dominant liberal claim that these can be empty—that is, sufficiently neutral with respect to God that they can construct institutions that would, in principle, be themselves religiously neutral. On Giussani's view, this is ontologically impossible. Indeed, such a claim of neutrality implies just the religious positivism that is the beginning of atheistic order.

Man's structural openness and non-neutrality with respect to the infinite God imply that his or her activities of reason and freedom can never be accounted for exhaustively in terms of the finite. The person's restlessness for the infinite does not disappear when he or she denies or ignores or is unaware of the true infinite. The restlessness for what is truly infinite, if it does not resolve itself in God, will construct for itself other infinities. Giussani's proposal thus helps disclose the proper meaning of America's widespread consumerist and empiricist mentality—twin shoots of the positivist trunk—as a "bad infinity" (this term has a Hegelian origin but not

²⁷L. Giussani, *The Religious Sense* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).

a Hegelian meaning, as I use it here). Both consumerism and empiricism consist in an endless, successive preoccupation with finite entities. The consumerist seeks meaning and fulfillment through the acquisition of one *thing* after another. The positivist thinks along the (empirical) surfaces of *things*, gathering meaning through the endless addition of finite bit to finite bit. Both disperse the true ("vertical") Infinite at the heart of things into an endless ("horizontal") succession of finite entities, thus losing, in the words of Giussani, the "relationship with (the) 'beyond' ['vertical infinity'] . . . [which] ensures the adventure of the here and now" (RS, 133).

The consumerist and empirical-positivist patterns of thought and life characteristic of America are thus revealed as forms of atheism or nihilism. "Bad infinity" is, in fact, simply a way of emptying the reality of the Infinite *as infinite*, turning the infinite thereby, however unconsciously, into "nothing." Atheism of this consumerist, positivist sort is boring—nihilism with a whimper—in contrast to what Giussani notes as the atheism of the anarchist who remains alive to the infinite at the heart of the finite, and is thus much closer to the authentically religious person. (The loss of ontological seriousness is what constitutes the profound difference between, say, Richard Rorty and Nietzsche.)

In light of what we have said, we can now approach the proper meaning of what Giussani terms the "heart," or the "elementary experience," which is the criterion for judgment that is the beginning of the human being's liberation. For Giussani, the "heart" or "elementary experience" is "the original impetus with which the human being reaches out to [the whole of] reality" (RS, 9). The elementary experience is not something other than reason, but rather the whole person inclusive of reason—reason being defined, again, as the capacity to become aware of reality in all of its factors (RS, 12).

The criterion for judgment is thus carried within our elementary experience of reality: within our *heart*. This criterion does not free us entirely from the circularity of inquiry, even as it suffices nonetheless to make our judgments reasonable, that is, "objective." On the one hand, we do not break out of the circle: the elementary experience is always already an engaged disposition of the whole person toward and with the whole of what is. On the other hand, the judgment of what Giussani calls "correspondence" (between the judging person and reality), when it occurs, is not merely "subjective," for an engaged disposition of the whole person toward and with what is reveals the truth of being, namely, that being is "presence," hence just this dynamic event of encounter between subject and object.

Giussani's "resolution" of the problem of "realism" therefore consists in what we may call a new integration of subjectivity and objectivity. On the one hand, every engagement with reality is just that: a drama which always presupposes the immanence of freedom in every reasonable approach to reality. At the same time, that engagement always discloses at its core the presence of an other (always, at least implicitly, the

Other: as Aquinas said, “every knower knows God implicitly in all that he or she knows”—a presence best defined in aesthetic terms.²⁸

Giussani’s approach thus offers a challenge to two dominant characteristics of post-Enlightenment culture. On the one hand, it replaces the idea that “knowledge is power” (Bacon, and Descartes also) with the idea that knowledge is more basically—both in terms of the knower and of what is known—a matter of love. On the other hand, it replaces the moralism that fails to see that our engagement with the other is not primarily a construction of the self consisting in the manipulation of the other, but rather a being drawn out of one’s self by the beauty or attractiveness of the other (the moral is always-already included in the aesthetic). To put this in theological terms: the self’s relation to the other is not Pelagian but first a matter of grace (understood aesthetically as the appearance of the gratuitous love of the Other).

It should not be necessary, in light of all that we have said, to point out that Giussani’s radical approach to questions of meaning and existence does not for all that signify what is often called a “root and branch critique of modernity.” First of all, integration properly understood can never be reactionary, since it must—at least on Giussani’s reading—always take account of the truth of the other, which cannot but be in some way always historical and new. Secondly, and in this light, the substance of Giussani’s proposal consists precisely in a taking over of modernity’s subjectivity and freedom, transforming these in a way intended not to reject them but to deepen them, by re-integrating them into the fullness of their creaturely being, hence into their constitutive relation to God. Indeed, it is precisely because Giussani does not wish to deny but to secure and deepen modern subjectivity and freedom that he is compelled to reject the fragmented liberal (i.e., pelagian and nominalist) reading of them that has prevailed in much of modernity.

So far, we have said nothing explicitly about what Giussani calls the “hypothesis”²⁹ of Christian revelation. I will say a word here about this crucial notion only insofar as it helps clarify Giussani’s response to the religious positivism we have insisted is prevalent in America.

²⁸This is not the place to attempt to resolve the more technical ontological and epistemological issues brought into play here. Giussani’s proposal, for example, implies a different sense of what suffices as “scientific demonstration” or “proof” in its conventional, post-enlightenment sense, at least as far as the fundamental questions of the meaning of existence are concerned, but this is for discussion on another occasion.

²⁹Giussani uses the term “hypothesis” in a sense different from the more conventional meaning in English: “hypothesis” for him has nothing to do with what is arbitrary and distant and of little consequence—for example, as in “if it rains tomorrow . . .” On the contrary, “hypothesis” in Giussani’s sense is rather a matter of urgency, literally of life and death, and it just so far poses an “obligatory” question, one emerging from the heart of the experience of being. Giussani’s interpretation, as “ontological” rather than “pragmatic,” should therefore also not be confused with American philosopher William James’s understanding of hypothesis and experiment in the matter of religious belief: but that must be shown elsewhere.

It is important to see first of all that, for Giussani, this "hypothesis" has nothing to do with what is arbitrary, distant, and could therefore reasonably be ignored. Were that so, Giussani would himself slip into the very positivism that his religious sense—as we have interpreted it—is meant to counter. The apparent dilemma therefore is this: on the one hand, if Christian revelation is proposed to us as a purely "accidental" or arbitrary fact, which, accordingly, is not experienced as the very truth of our being, we are left by definition with positivism—that is, with some variant of fideism or pietism. If, on the other hand, Christian revelation is proposed to us simply as the truth of our being, we lose the essential mystery and gratuitousness of that revelation and, accordingly, fall into some variant of rationalism.

Giussani's "hypothesis" thus must be interpreted in terms of paradox. On the one hand, the truth of our being is always-already—hence from its beginning—a restlessness that can neither conceive nor produce what it nonetheless somehow anticipates and hopes for. It is a restlessness, in other words, that must be patient, that, structurally, must wait for the Infinite Other to reveal his existence. On the other hand, precisely in the surprise of God's revelation to me, which is actualized first and essentially in the sacramental conversion or reversal called Baptism, we experience the truth of our being. We experience the "correspondence" with what we were all along and from the outset of our existence desiring, albeit unknowingly.

Both the simultaneity and the asymmetry indicated here are crucial: it is precisely *in* the conversion or reversal, which includes most fundamentally the Cross and Eucharist of Jesus Christ, that I experience the truth of what I had desired all along, in other words, the truth of my being. Indeed, if the truth of creaturely being did not resonate precisely *in* the reversal of the Cross and the Eucharist, Giussani's attempt to redress the problem of positivism would only embrace the opposite side of the positivist coin, thus falling into rationalism.

To be sure, this raises profound issues that need further unpacking. I would only conclude my comments regarding Giussani's position on the "hypothesis" of the Christian Fact by suggesting that it is best interpreted in light of the great Augustinian (and Thomistic) tradition, which insists that our hearts are restless until they rest in the God of Jesus Christ; and that this God, in his infinite transcendence, is at the same time "*interior intimo meo*" (Augustine)—more intimate to me than I am to myself. Here, then, is the answer to America's religious positivism, which gives us a transcendence conceived as mechanical exteriority without real immanence. For the proper response to positivism's transcendent God consists in countering it, not with a simply immanent God (pantheism), but with a God who is radically immanent precisely because he is infinitely transcendent. In thus recalling to us the way of the Christian God of love, who is so Other that he acts in us as though he were the non-other (Nicholas of Cusa), Giussani overcomes America's religious positivism—its atheism—without succumbing to integralism: God's entry into us comes from infinitely outside of us, but it comes in the immanent, and hence freeing, manner of love.

I conclude this section regarding the “religious sense” with a summary of the method by which Giussani means to propose it to others. Citing the text from 1 John (1:1b–2) about how the eternal life present to the Father became visible to us in Jesus Christ, Giussani says:

Here is the answer: the presence of the Christian Fact lies in the unity of believers. Here is the most telling phenomenon. This is the miracle, the sign. That which is humanly impossible—the abolition of estrangement and the birth of a new fraternal bond, which does not spring from the flesh but does involve the flesh—Jesus understood as the evidence of his divinity: “As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn 17:21, cf. Gal. 3:26–29).

Thus we see the method, characteristic of that Fact, for “converting” the world: that this unity be made visible, everywhere. In the absence of this unity, no Christian religiosity can stand.

Paul VI strongly affirmed this:

Where is that “People of God” of which so much has been said, and of which so much is said now—where is it? This *sui generis* ethnic reality which is distinguished and qualified by its religious and messianic (or priestly and prophetic, if you will) character, which entirely converges on Christ as its central focus, and which derives entirely from Christ—how is it structured? What characterizes it? How is it organized? How does it exercise its ideal and invigorating mission in the society in which it is immersed?

We know well that the people of God now has, historically, a name which is more familiar to everyone: the Church.

This is not an esoteric theology, inaccessible to the common mind-set of the faithful People; it is indeed the highest truth, but open to every believer and capable of inspiring that style of life, that “communion of spirit,” that identity of sentiment, that feeling of mutual solidarity, which pours forth into a “multitude of believers a single heart and a single soul,” as it was at the dawn of Christianity. That sense of community, of charity, of unity, that is, that sense of the one, catholic—or universal—Church, must grow in us. The awareness of being not only a population with certain common characteristics, but a People, a true People of God, must assert itself in us.

Bringing out the unity of believers in the place where the believer finds himself: this is the revelation of “communion” that will have as its fruit a “liberation” that can be humanly experienced, that is, a humanization of the environment which is more adequate to the person’s destiny.³⁰

IV.

To sum up: the significance of Giussani’s religious sense for our present situation consists in its essentially ontological, dramatic, and aesthetic character. For Giussani religion comprehends the order of being,

³⁰R*AMM*, 138–39.

in a way that integrates the true, the good, and the beautiful. His religious sense at its core thus indicates a new culture in which "being" takes precedence over "having," and the significance of this becomes particularly clear in light of Pope John Paul II's discussion of a growing battle between a "culture of life" on the one hand, and a "culture of death" on the other.³¹ For at the heart of the culture of death lie the problems of abortion, poverty, and homelessness, and so on, all of which derive from the primacy of "having" and the relations of power bound up with this primacy.

It is on the other hand the renewed sense of God, and of the being of the true, the good, and the beautiful, that makes possible and demands and indeed constitutes the priority of "being" over "having" that is the essence of the culture of life. The claim is stunning: America's most serious social problems are problems most fundamentally of the existence and nature of God and, consequently, of the reality of creatureliness, and the task of eliminating them (abortion, poverty, and homelessness) is, anteriorly and most fundamentally, the task of retrieving a renewed sense of the intrinsic truth, goodness, and beauty of all creatures, of the entire cosmos. The Christian's missionary task, in other words, is spiritual and ontological before it is moral or political or, in terms of John Paul II's "new evangelization," it is social *precisely as theological*. Or so at least this is how I read Giussani.

In a word, Giussani's religious sense reintroduces a sense of being as gift, summed up in his assertion that "prayer is the only human gesture which totally realizes the human being's stature" (RS, 106). The religious sense, in short, consists most fundamentally in reinserting the order of being into prayer. It is just here, in the reintegration of the orders of being and knowing—and not only the order of willing—into prayer that the problem of peculiarly American atheism is met, the atheism which, as Pope John Paul II puts it, constitutes the spiritual drama of our time.*

□

³¹Cf. *Evangelium vitae*, 28.

*This address was given at "The Religious Sense Symposium" in Washington, D.C., 11 September 1998.