

Luigi Giussani on the “Religious Sense” and the Cultural Situation of Our Time

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“In the experience of a great love, all that happens becomes an event inside that love” (Romano Guardini). These words cited by Luigi Giussani provide the proper context for understanding what Giussani means when he insists that “the Christian fact is totalizing.” The present article sketches the main elements of Giussani’s argument as set forth in his book, *The Religious Sense*,¹ and highlights the significance of the argument for our current cultural situation.

¹ Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, newly revised translation by John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997). All of my citations are from this book.

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Reasonableness and Freedom

Reason and freedom reveal their full reality only in “the radical engagement of the self with life, an involvement which exemplifies itself in [questions about the ultimate meaning of existence, of pain and death]” (45). Reason and freedom, therefore, are indissolubly bound up with “the religious sense,” which is just this restlessness for ultimacy or totality—that is, for infinity.

Hence Giussani (re-)defines reason and freedom as essentially dramatic, drama being understood as the encounter of the infinite with the finite occurring at the heart of the finite. The most reasonable and the freest persons are those most passionately engaged with all things in relation to what is ultimate, to the infinite that lies within and beyond all things. They are those who love precisely *everything*, but *profoundly*, in this sense.

Reason and freedom in their primary meaning, in short, are not capacities simply for seeing, or choosing between, *this* and *that*, but capacities for total breadth within ultimate depth.²

The redefinition of reason and freedom occurring here is perhaps best summed up in the words of Dostoyevsky cited by Giussani: “the whole of human existence consists merely of making it possible for every person to bow down before what is infinitely great. If the person were to be deprived of the infinitely great, he or she would refuse to go on living, and die of despair.”³

² We should note Giussani’s assertion that there are finally only two types of persons who “capture entirely the grandeur of the human being: the anarchist and the authentically religious man” (9). Giussani says: “By nature, man is relation to the infinite: on the one hand, the anarchist affirms himself to an infinite degree, while, on the other, the authentically religious man accepts the infinite as his meaning” (9).

Giussani’s point is that these two types of persons are both alive to the relation to the infinite that most profoundly structures the human being. Only the anarchist and the authentically religious person, in other words, live the drama that essentially constitutes human existence (cf. n. 4).

But we miss Giussani’s sense of anarchism if we identify it too quickly with the ethical relativism so widespread in America’s consumerist and positivist culture: because the anarchist in Giussani’s sense, unlike the more conventional American relativist, has not trivialized the search for meaning: he or she remains truly alive to the infinite at the heart of the finite. (Giussani’s anarchist should not be identified too quickly, for example, with someone like Richard Rorty, who, with a shrug of his shoulders, is content to occupy himself with the endlessly successive surface meanings of things.) Cf. the notion of “bad infinity” as discussed in the conclusion of this article.

³ *The Devils* (Penguin, 1971), 656; cited in *RS*, 52.

Unreasonableness of the Denial of the Religious Question

The reasonable person, then, lives consciously and at every moment relationship with the infinite and, consequently, has engaged most profoundly the questions constituting the religious sense. The unreasonable person is the one who denies or ignores these questions. Giussani lists six ways in which this can occur, all of which are unreasonable because they claim to explain reality but do not consider adequately “*all of [its] factors*” (59).

(1) The first three unreasonable positions empty the ultimate question of its content. There is first the theoretical denial which consists in dismissing the question as the sort of senseless question characteristic of adolescence.

The second denial consists in setting the question aside in favor of a life of voluntaristic self-affirmation. Life now becomes a matter of fulfilling an ideal sentiment produced by one's own effort, but without any clear objective direction.

The third denial is practical: it consists in evading the question regarding the ultimate meaning and value of life because it is too painful. “Thirsty for strong excitations, [the crowd] turns to the cinema, the stadiums, the taverns” (65)—to drugs and alcohol. Here is sought “the flavor of life,” the pleasure of at least some small space of existence (65). The most noble form of practical denial says “It is impossible to answer these questions; therefore we must anesthetize ourselves” (66).

(2) The second set of unreasonable positions to some degree takes seriously the reality of the religious question, but reduces it (70). The first of these holds that life is worth living, but only in so far as it consists in aesthetic taste and translates into a continuous flow of aesthetic pleasure (71).

The second of these is what Giussani terms the “desperate negation,” and which indeed he says is the most dramatic, most impassioned, and most serious of the erroneous attitudes in the face of the question of ultimacy (72). “This is the position that totally denies that an answer to the question exists” (72). It is the most dramatic position because “here man's pure option—between yes and no—is played out” (72). In the preced-

ing stances, the individual sought to destroy the questions; here the questions are taken seriously, but end in despair.⁴

The third denial asserts that life has meaning but finds that meaning in an evolutionary process that eliminates the value of the individual person (76ff.). All is for the edification of history.

All of these stances thus describe the unreasonable person—the person, consequently, who fails to realize his or her humanity, by failing fully to engage the religious question.

The “Authentically Religious Person”

The reasonable and free person, therefore, is the authentically religious person. First of all, as we have seen, the religious person opens him or her self radically to the totality of what is, in and through the dramatic event of encounter with the infinite. Giussani describes this as a sense of being, not as an abstract entity, but as a “presence,” indeed “a presence which I do not myself make, which I find.” (101). Further, he states that presence is “the original perception of a *given*,” which implies something that “gives.” This original perception thus implies further a sense of reality as gift, and hence of myself as first an active receiver of gift (101). Presence, then, evokes awe and wonder and radical amazement. It is like “discovering something beautiful” (34).

Furthermore, “the human person, having become aware of this real ‘being,’ this inexorable presence with its diversities, and of his own ‘I’ as a part of it, also realizes that within this reality is an *order*, that this reality [therefore] is cosmic (the Greek, ‘cosmos,’ signifies ‘order’)” (103). The person then senses a plan in this order, hence interprets this cosmic reality as “providential” (104). Within the experience described, a sense of the distinction between good and evil emerges (107).

Imbedded more precisely within the original experience of being as presence is the sense that “*I do not make myself* . . . I do not give myself being . . . I am ‘given.’ This is the moment of maturity when I discover myself to be dependent on something else” (105). This sense of dependence carries an intuition of a

⁴Thus Giussani understands the anarchist and the one who negates out of desperation to be closest to the authentically religious person: it is these persons alone who have entered into the drama containing life’s meaning, even though, evidently, it is only the authentically religious person who finally can bear out the drama in its integrity.

mysterious presence of “*You-who-make-me*” (105–106). Hence, in a word, “to be conscious of [myself] right to the core is to perceive, at the depths of the self, an Other. This is prayer: to be conscious of [myself] to the very centre, to the point of meeting an Other. Thus prayer is the only human gesture which totally realizes the human being’s stature” (106).

The Method of “Proof”

All of the positions that Giussani has termed unreasonable are so, of course, on the supposition that the religious sense alone makes life truly and finally meaningful. But we now come to the crux of the problem: how does the argument here avoid a “vicious circularity”? We discover the inadequacy of “unreasonable” positions in light of the religious sense. At the same time, the burden of these positions is precisely to call into question the authenticity of the religious sense. How do we escape this seeming circularity, with its apparent dilemma?

This question, in my opinion, takes us to the very heart of Giussani’s proposal, and indeed to his distinctive genius.

The decisive point is to recognize that there is no simply abstract or static answer to this question. Abstract propositions cannot, as it were, bootstrap us out of the circle within which we find ourselves when we begin to ask after the meaning of existence. There are rational arguments, to be sure. But it is crucial to see that these arguments can be rightly posed *only dramatically*: only by giving myself over to the dramatic “logic”—or better, “ontology”—of life. The question of meaning can be reasonably and freely posed only passionately. Only by giving myself unreservedly to—and thus by loving—life can I truly discover that life is a gift of love.

Thus we break out of what would otherwise be the vicious circularity of inquiry when we are provoked by an other whose life, indeed being, embodies the arguments. I break out of the circle through the immediate intuition of an other whose beauty—the attractiveness of whose reasonableness and freedom—provokes me and draws me forth from myself and into the drama of his or her life.

Here, then, we find the proper meaning of what Giussani terms the “heart,” or the “elementary experience,” as well as the criterion for judgment that is the beginning of the human being’s

liberation. The “heart” or “elementary experience” is “the original impetus with which the human being reaches out to [the whole of] reality” (9). The elementary experience, therefore, 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 (12).

The criterion for judgment is thus carried within our elementary experience of reality: within our *heart*. But we can see now how appeal to 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 “correspondence” (between the judging person and reality), when it occurs, is not merely “subjective”: an engaged disposition of the whole person toward and with what is reveals the truth about being: that being is “presence,” hence just this dynamic event of encounter between subject and object.

But, again, we are tempted to ask: does this really “prove” anything? What does it really verify other than our own predilections—the predilections of those who want reality to be warm and secure because a gift from a generous Giver?

Giussani’s answer is simply that there is no way around the paradox: reasonableness and “proof” must go the way of drama, beauty, and love because drama, beauty, and love are what is: drama, beauty, and love constitute the deepest reality of subject and object in their mutual relations. In other words, an absolute—static, abstract, and distant—starting point (hence “demonstration” in its conventional sense) is simply not available to us in our quest for life’s meaning. The search for an absolute beginning itself already presupposes a tacit judgment that life is undramatic, that reality is prior to beauty and love, that being is not “presence,” and this judgment itself requires a verification that cannot be forthcoming; or rather, can itself be verified only dramatically (in a way involving dynamic relation between subject and object, recognition of the self-in-relation-to-the-other, hence of the otherness of the other, and so on), thus contradicting itself. The “demonstrable” in the familiar, post-Enlightenment, sense gives us, not the *absolute* beginning it claims, but merely a *different* beginning.

Let me risk a summary by saying that Giussani's method of "proof" is as simple and as profound as falling in love: I am provoked by, and thereby become alive to, the beauty of an other. The surprise of the other is immediate; I then confirm the authenticity of the experience only "subsequently," from within the dramatic event itself. The "correspondence" between subject and object that defines truth occurs only within and never outside the engagement of the whole subject with the whole object, in relation to the totality of factors that include, most fundamentally, the Infinite.

There is no genuine method with respect to the question of life's meaning that does not begin with the "foundational" experience of falling in love with something, someone, intuited as beautiful. And there is no reasonable "proof" that can bypass this "foundational" experience of falling in love.⁵

The "Hypothesis" of Revelation

So far, we have said nothing that directly evokes the Christian Fact. Nonetheless, Giussani implies in the end that the "hypothesis"⁶ of Christian revelation alone finally sustains the drama that is the "essence" of life and indeed of all reality.

But here, again, it is essential to remember the method of "proof." Giving ourselves over to the full "onto-logic" of life "requires" us to remain open to, indeed involves our "desiring," the Giver who seems somehow implied in the sense of life as given—or as gift. Indeed, the paradox indicated earlier now reaches its greatest intensity: if I give myself over to life unreservedly, I find nonetheless that I cannot produce or even conceive what I anticipate and hope for. I can only wait for the Infinite

⁵ It is beyond our purposes to show how Giussani's line of argument here is not inconsistent with, say, an Aristotelian notion of how knowledge contains more than what is "demonstrable": the "intuition" of primary premises (*nous*) "precedes" and provides the anterior context for all *epistēmē*. I note this only to underscore the fact that Giussani's sense of "circularity" in (basic) argument gives up the claim neither of universality nor of reasonableness.

⁶ Giussani uses the term "hypothesis" in a sense different from our 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.

Other to reveal his existence and only then, *consequent upon the surprise* of that revelation, can I experience its “correspondence” with what I was desiring.

Here, then, is the Christian claim: the Infinite Other has entered into human history as a . . . presence within history that speaks to us as one of us (143). “This is the exceptional hypothesis, revelation in the strict sense of the word: that the mystery reveals itself through a factor of history [—a singular historical person—] with [whom] . . . it identifies itself” (143).⁷

In light of the “hypothesis” of Christian revelation, of Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Presence of the Infinite God in and among the finite, we discover that our being which, as Giussani says, is structurally a waiting (54)—for grace, for the event of salvation—is structurally Marian (cf. 143–144). Like Mary, the Mother of God, the *theotokos*, we let the infinite God enter our being (*fiat*), in order that we may then magnify (*magnificat*) God into the finite, always and everywhere. In a word, the Virgin Woman Mary is the most concrete expression of Giussani’s claim that “prayer is the only human gesture which totally realizes the human being’s stature” (106).

The Religious Sense and the Current Cultural Situation in America

What are the implications of Giussani’s proposal in and for our cultural situation in contemporary America and indeed the West?

On the one hand, his proposal suggests that America’s dominant consumerist and positivist mentality can be best defined

⁷ Giussani cites the words of Eliot, which again indicate the method by which we arrive at the truth of this hypothesis:

Men’s curiosity searches past and future
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend
The point of intersection of the timeless
With time, is an occupation for the saint . . .
No occupation either, but something given
And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.” (143)

Note the curiosity, and ultimately the death of love and selflessness and self-surrender: the perception of the “hypothesis” as true is dramatic. Finally, only the saint lives this truth—the dramatic truth of the “hypothesis”—fully.

in terms of a “bad infinity.” Both consumerism and positivism 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. What both miss is the true Infinite at the heart of things, dispersing this true (“vertical”) Infinite into an endless (“horizontal”) succession of finite entities. Positivist rationality and consumerist freedom, therefore, because they ignore the infinite, become characteristically undramatic: as Giussani says, only “relationship with (the) ‘beyond’ [“vertical infinity”] . . . ensures the adventure of the here and now” (133). Consumerism’s finite gods of usury, lust, and power reduce life in the end to an empty—if frenetic—boredom (133).

The consumerist and positivist patterns of thought and life characteristic of America are thus revealed to consist above all in a meaninglessness deriving finally from a denial of the religious sense: they are forms of atheism or nihilism. “Bad infinity” is simply a way of emptying the reality of the Infinite *as infinite*, turning the infinite thereby, however unconsciously, into “nothing.”⁸

To state the matter positively, Giussani’s proposal discloses America’s cultural problems to be, not primarily moral, political, or technical in nature, but religious, aesthetic, and ontological: religious, because every single event of our lives *implies* an encounter with the Infinite, with the Infinite Love revealed in Jesus Christ; aesthetic, because recognition of the authentic otherness of the o(O)ther presupposes perception of the other’s beauty; and ontological, because the whole of our being is involved in relation to the whole of reality. This distinction between the moral, political, and technical on the one hand, and the religious, aesthetic, and ontological on the other, is what

⁸ Atheism and nihilism thus converge in their common reduction of the Infinite in our midst to nothing; or rather, they fail to see that the “no-thing-like” nature of the Infinite—that is, the “not-finite”—in our midst is utterly *full* and not *empty* of life, drama, beauty, and love.

What is characteristic of this consumerist-positivist atheism in the American sense is that it is typically practical, implicit—and in this sense feeble—, as distinct from theoretical, explicit, and resolute. This, then, is the key to the response to the recent *New York Times Magazine* report (1997) which states that, statistically, America remains one of the most religious peoples on earth, with more than ninety-five percent professing belief in God.

Dostoyevsky understood so well when he insisted that our reason and our freedom are from their very roots destined to bow down before what is infinitely great, in every engagement with all things.

Problems like homelessness and abortion, boredom and meaninglessness, in other words, are at bottom problems of religious drama.

The point is that every event of life, every circumstance of life, can become a matter of infinite worth, by discovering therein the living presence of the Infinite God. We need to fall in love with the Infinite in our midst; and this falling in love is what Christians call sanctity.

Here, then, for Giussani, is the neuralgic point for dialogue among the worldviews prevalent in our time, relative to the distinct tendencies of modern Western culture. Is life a drama? Can life truly be a drama outside of the event of the encounter with the infinite? Can there be such an encounter if the infinite is not itself a *living presence* at the heart of the finite?

In short, the question is finally this: has the Infinite really become flesh, and does he really dwell among us?*

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