



Encountering God through human experience: the life and thought of Luigi Giussani

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Abstract

This article gives an introduction to the life and thought of Luigi Giussani (1922-2005), a Catholic theologian who is the founder of the Communion and Liberation movement. Its focus is on Giussani's proposal of the Christian life, not simply as a set of rules or a system of thought, but as an encounter with the person of Christ. As a consequence, experience is placed at the centre of faith because God himself experienced humanity in history. Since Giussani's life was built alongside his theological articulation, the article then discusses the foundational concept of "religious sense", briefly highlighting its developments in education and psychology, and concludes with the correspondent answer of revelation in Christianity.

Keywords: Luigi Giussani; encounter; religious sense; incarnation; experience

Italian theologian Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) was one of the most important voices in the Catholic Church in the 20th century. Though a prolific theologian, Giussani (2000b, 2006) resigned from his position as Professor of Theology in Venegono in order to re-establish a Christian witness among high school students in post-war Italy in the 50's, when the influence of Christianity in culture was diminishing. His influence on this first group of students was so significant that the organization developed into a world-wide movement in over 70 countries. This lay movement, called "Communion and Liberation" (CL), aims to be

a missionary presence in order to bring the faith back into the lives of people, meeting them everywhere, in particular in their various places of work, in schools, offices and factories. The field of the apostolate, therefore, is essentially the working world (...) by living his own job or profession as the Memory of Christ, that is, translating every activity into an offering (Rondoni, 2000, p. 160).

Communion and Liberation's emphasis on being the Memory of God in the workplace reflects Giussani's belief that a dedicated human presence in the world reveals the ultimate presence, God himself.

Giussani's (1998) proposal for Christian life is that Christianity is not simply a system of thought, set of rules, and doctrines that are understood only by theologians. Above all, it is an encounter with a person, with the Risen Christ. It is a lived experience, a love story revealed through an amazing presence; God becoming human, the Word made flesh. Therefore, true human experience is at the centre of the Christian life, because God himself experienced humanity in history. At the heart of Giussani's theology is a commitment to



understanding experience in the whole of life, for “every earthly experience lived in the Spirit of Jesus, risen from the dead, blossoms in eternity” (Giussani, 2000a, p. 173). This paper will argue that Giussani proposed Christian life as primarily an encounter with Christ and his incarnation which changes everyday human experience in all of its dimensions.

Given that Giussani’s life informed and exemplified what he believed about Christian life as the incarnation of a lived experience, this paper will explore his personal history alongside the formation of his thought. In the concluding section, the concept of “religious sense” will be further explored, for it is the foundation of his theological anthropology; what it means to be a human being in the world.

Incarnation and Experience: Luigi Giussani’s Life¹

From his youth, Luigi Giussani was interested in the lived authenticity of faith as a human experience. His Socialist father, Benjamino, an artisan with a passion for music, helped Luigi to value artistic expression. His Catholic mother named Angelina, however, encouraged the infant Luigi to realize the pertinence of Jesus to his everyday life. As a theology student from age 11, he received a Christocentric education, where all of human life had Christ as the focal point. From politics to literature, from history to man’s search for meaning, from earthly work to spiritual contemplation, everything was touched by the beauty of the Word made flesh upon whom everything converged. Giussani (2000a) affirmed that Christian life is a daily miracle, for the presence of Christ recreates, penetrates and changes all things.

Giussani’s years as a theology student helped him grasp the meaning of Christ’s incarnation in everyday life. Giussani (2000b) recalls his encounter with the prologue of John’s gospel as a life changing experience. One of his professors explained the presence of the Word of God in the world, through which everything was made, saying “therefore Beauty was made flesh, Goodness was made flesh, Justice was made flesh, Love, Life, Truth were made flesh. Being does not exist in a Platonic nowhere; (...) it is one among us” (Giussani, 2000b, pp. 108-9). From Giussani’s youth, the eternal Word of God who entered time had been an all-encompassing and all-transformative event which led him to embrace everything in reality as touched by the sublime drama of the incarnation. As he later described it,

My life as a very young man was literally invaded by this; both as a memory that continually influenced my thought and as a stimulus to make me re-evaluate the banality of everyday life. The present moment, from then on,

¹ This section intends to be a brief summary of Luigi Giussani’s life, not a comprehensive biographical study. The main sources for this historical information have been D. Rondoni’s (2000) edited work *Communion and Liberation: a movement in the Church*, J. Zucchi’s (2007) “Luigi Giussani, the Church, and youth in the 1950s” and Giussani’s (2006) *The Journey to Truth is an Experience*.



was no longer banal for me. Everything that existed- and therefore everything that was beautiful, true, attractive, fascinating, even as a possibility- found in that message its reason for being, as the certainty of a presence and a motivating hope which caused one to embrace everything (Giussani, 2000b, p. 110).

Giussani's realization about divine realities entering ordinary moments shaped his later thought and his constant engagement with all of reality in daily life.

During his teenage years, Giussani comprehended that the universal search for beauty, love, truth, justice and happiness had its endpoint in Christ. This quest could only be fulfilled through his presence. Inside a restless heart is written its final destiny: "God". Reading the literature of the agnostic poet Giacomo Leopardi enriched this insight. This poet realized that his desire for a beautiful woman was primarily a longing for ultimate beauty. But, no creature could completely match his longing. Giussani noted that Leopardi was looking for something else in the face of these women: beauty itself. This unachievable objective was revealed in the wonder-filled experience of encountering Christ. He recognized that "[f]aith is recognizing an exceptional presence that corresponds wholly to one's own destiny and adhering to this presence" (Giussani, Alberto & Prades, 1998, p. 22). The conviction that Christ's presence corresponded to all of humanity's desires gave meaning to every experience during Giussani's young years.

As a young Catholic cleric and university professor in the 50's Giussani was challenged by the way faith was relegated to parishes. It seemed irrelevant in schools and universities. Furthermore, school teachers had a dualistic approach, separating the religious from the temporal. He believed that unless Christian teachers committed themselves to proposing a new way of looking at the world, students would not understand how "Christian faith and life might respond to the theoretical and existential *problématiques* which become most acute precisely in the high school years." (Giussani, 2006, p. 5). Embodying his conviction, Giussani left his position as a promising theology professor in 1954. He accepted a position as teacher of religion in a state school and sought an educational relationship with high school students. This was to be for him an experience lived together. He sought, primarily, the rediscovery of the human significance of faith in the reality of life, such as: asking "what has every single thing (from holidays to mathematics, from falling in love to social commitment) to do with Christ?" (Giussani, 2006, p. 6). Giussani's first students were moved by the rediscovery of what it meant to be a Christian, in terms of experience in real life. As John Zucchi (2007) points out, the central concern Giussani had "was the relevance of Christ to everyday life - work, family, politics, friendship, desire and so on. Such a reading on experience was the only possibility for Christianity to impact culture" (p. 141).

Giussani (2004a) believed his students would learn if immersed in an experience of wonder. That encounter would form true education. Intense looks, shared life and common gestures, through the wonder of an encounter, would give meaning to concepts and ideas. It



was educating a person to take the things of earth, simple as they are, in their most sublime aspects. Giussani would take the students to fields in order to look intensely for and appreciate the beauty around them. He believed this was the experience of the first apostles: they were cultivating wonder. They followed Jesus not because of his systematized thought, but because they were amazed at his presence. They were astonished. There was awe. The truth of his message made sense to them because it was a consequence of a truly relational, wonder-filled experience. The journey of those who followed him was from awe to conviction (Giussani, 1998).

According to Giussani (1998), in the history of God's Kingdom, the initial revelatory event is an encounter, revealed as a relational experience. Since the Genesis account, God has been seeking the face of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It has been a personal encounter. The apex of God's historical, existential self-revelation is the incarnation, death and resurrection of the truth himself. The disciples' journey with Christ authenticated his message as existentially fulfilling the original needs of their humanity. In those days, the disciples' hearts found the presence that unexpectedly and clearly corresponded to their desire for beauty, truth and justice that constituted their nature (Giussani, 1998). Christianity is the recognition of an exceptional encounter; for in the experience of a great love, everything else that happens circulates around that all-encompassing love experience (Romano Guardini, quoted by Giussani, 1996, p. 20).

Giussani's students sought to verify in daily life the Christian proposal, for every activity was an opportunity to form a judgement grounded on the Christian event. The whole of reality needed to be measured according to the presence of the eternal Word, who invaded every aspect of life. This truth shaped their meetings. They spent vacations together as an opportunity for education; and since Christ transformed every aspect of reality, even boys and girls could participate together. This radical change for the 50's was seen by conservative Catholics as a threatening move. Though belonging to the *Gioventù Studentesca* (Student Youth), a group of the wider Catholic Action (lay Catholics encouraging Christian influence in society), the distinctiveness of Giussani's educational method was evident. Furthermore, resistance in some the circles of Catholic Church led his group to take their own path. Despite the opposition, Giussani's group flourished in the 50's and early 60's as a new proposal for Christian experience in everyday life.

The depth of the first disciples' experience with Jesus shed light on Giussani's (1998) emphasis that the Christian life is the expression of deep communal relationships. In the mid 60's, a time of political upheaval, the larger student world was much politicized. Salvation and liberation were seen in socio-economic and political terms, and Catholic associations were falling apart. Responding to this crisis, in 1968, Communion and Liberation became the new name of the emerging movement. Giussani's movement experienced their first crisis, but they also underwent a renewal and found a clearer understanding of their original



vision. Their message to the troubled times of the 60's was that true liberation was the fruit of communion.

The 70's was a time when Marxists were influential among the committed youth in Italy and Communion and Liberation received fierce attacks. Practicing Catholics in Italy realized they were a minority. Nevertheless, even amid persecution Communion and Liberation engaged in public debate, always siding with Catholics, with an "incomprehensible insistence on seeing the Christian experience as a unifying criterion for an integral personal commitment, from the family to workplace, from school to politics" (Rondini, 2000, p. 55). Amidst these difficult public debates, the election of Karol Wojtyla, John Paul II, as Pope in 1978 marked an even stronger identification of Communion and Liberation with the Catholic Church.

Giussani and John Paul II shared similar understandings on the nature of faith and culture; their personal friendship was expressed by their theological likeness. They were both interested in theological anthropology. Both Giussani and Wojtyla expressed a Christian humanism with an anthropology based on the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. Wojtyla's anthropology, which was constructed in opposition to Marxist humanism, had similarities to Giussani's, and can be defined as an existential Christian personalism that focuses on the life in this world as a foundation for culture and ethics (Cooper, 1995). A strong supporter of Communion and Liberation, the Pope gave a speech on the 30th anniversary of the movement, calling the hearers to "go out into all the world as bearers of the truth, beauty and peace that are encountered in Christ the Redeemer" (Pope John Paul II, quoted by Rondini, 2000, p. 63).

Giussani's (1996, 1997, 1998, 2004a, 2004b, 2006) theological anthropology was a foundational anchor for Communion and Liberation's experiential approach to Christian life. Since human nature is relationship with the Infinite, the realities of beauty, truth, love, justice, and happiness are not only things people seek after; they are the marks within a person of an imprint of God Himself, expressed in the desire for beauty, truth and love that have as their ultimate source and goal "The Beautiful, The Truth, The Love".

During the last decades of his life, the Catholic world started to publicly recognize Giussani's legacy. He was named Monsignor by Pope John Paul II in 1983, with the title of Honorary Prelate to His Holiness. Among numerous awards, in 1995 Giussani was given the International Catholic Culture prize. But Giussani has not limited his conversation and influence inside the Catholic faith, his works and studies have generated dialogue with other interlocutors. Giussani specialized in Eastern Theology and American Protestant Theology. He was willing to encounter anyone, without reservations, and was a contributor to ecumenical dialogue. He lived daily life intensely, seeking to mirror Christ's presence to those around him, valuing the dignity of every person even those from different traditions. Giussani lived his whole life inspiring many to look into their own frail daily circumstances



in search of genuine humanness, without preconceived ideas, proposing that the journey towards the truth about oneself would be true experience.

At Giussani's funeral in 2005, Cardinal Ratzinger (who became Pope Benedict XVI), remarked that Giussani was a man "wounded by beauty", a man who kept his eyes fixed on Christ. "He understood that Christianity is not an intellectual system, a packet of dogmas, a moralism; Christianity is an encounter, a love story; it is an event." On that day, thousands of people came from different parts of the world to honour Giussani's life.

The Religious Sense: Nature is Oriented to an Encounter

Giussani built his life alongside his theological articulation. From 1964 to 1990 he was the professor of Introductory Theology at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan. Angelo Scola (2006) points out that Giussani's thought is generative and original, capable of giving systematic and critical reason to man's elementary experience. As Eliza Buzzi (2003) suggests, Giussani's articulation is generative,

getting directly to the origin, that is, to the fundamental questions of meaning in the human experience and the Christian Event, with a deep awareness of their wide-ranging existential, theoretical, and cultural implications, it generates thought, in a constant passionate dialogue with the most varied of interlocutors (p. X).

Giussani is the author of many books, including his trilogy named "PerCorso": "The Religious Sense" (1997), "At the Origin of the Christian Claim" (1998) and "Why the Church?" (2004b). This trilogy encompasses a journey from the religious sense as an expression of anthropological openness in the world, to the self-revelation of God in Christ. It spans from the event of Christ to the continuation of his presence through the Church. Because of the richness and complexity of Giussani's legacy and many books, this paper will narrow its discussion, focusing on the "religious sense" as a pillar to his thought.

Giussani (1997) suggests that the "religious sense" is humanity's original nature, because we are fundamentally open to all of reality. The human soul is fascinated with the world in its entirety, oriented to an encounter with the whole. Intrinsically, it is a position of openness that is attracted to everything, seeking to discover ultimate answers. The human destiny is to affirm the Absolute, but when one unreasonably denies the authenticity of this search, one loses the capacity to live reality intensely.

The existential enquiries express the "religious sense" and exist at the core of one's being. Questions such as "what does reality consist of and what is it made for?", or even "why do I wake up today and engage life?" or "why is life the way it is?" cannot be rooted out or extinguished, but they require an ultimate, complete, and total answer. As Giussani (1997) points out, they are the expressions of the infinite restlessness of the human heart,



What is the ultimate meaning of existence? Or why is there pain and death, and why, in the end, is life worth living? (...) the Religious Sense lies within the reality of our self at the level of these questions: it coincides with the radical engagement of the self with life, an involvement which exemplifies itself in these questions (p. 45).

The more one is engaged in these questions, the more one lives seeking the intelligibility of the real, and realizes that his nature is a relationship with the infinite. In Giussani's (1997) thought, every action of a person, working or playing, eating or drinking, living or dying, are all expressions of a desire for something and a search for someone the self does not comprehend, but still seeks; but the centre of the person, the heart and its "religious sense, is also aware of the existence of an Other, and that this Object is true.

Giussani's (1997) formulation of the "religious sense" is generative, producing a wide-range of implications in different fields; in fact, many educational initiatives have been based on Giussani's proposal.² He believed that educating youth has the possibility of rebuilding a whole society. Giussani's (2004a) proposal is an education in hope and meaning in order to affirm all that is good, beautiful and true.

To educate includes, first, an immersion in a tradition, in a treasure of meaning that allows continuity with the past. It is to know and embrace a heritage. Second, through an educator, there is a transmission of values. This person, who knows and participates in that story, carries a tradition or a message that is a proposed to young people. By incarnating its content as a way of life, the educator cannot be scientifically or educationally neutral. Rather, encountering the content itself is prior to conceptualizing it, involves the whole person in an I-thou relationship. It is relational and personal in character, stirring gratitude and freedom, reintegrating being and knowing. Third, the educative process stimulates the learner to verify what was taught, to formulate hypotheses or to give a 'judgement' based on experience. The educative act cannot place norms, rules and content before wonder and desire for beauty, but stirs the verification that what was taught corresponds to reality. Ultimately, education generates the capacity to apprehend the infinite in ordinary experiences by seeking a commitment to all of reality (Giussani, 2004a).

Giussani's (1997) "religious sense" has also been in dialogue with the human sciences, particularly psychology. Giussani's anthropology, which conceives human beings in search

² Throughout the world, Giussani's life and thought have generated many educationally and socially relevant initiatives. The Italian foundation AVSI (Association of Volunteers in International Service) is a non-for-profit organization founded in 1972. The organization *Compagnia Delle Opere* (CDO) supports professionals who seek to overcome educational, social and economic challenges. It has fostered a wide variety of initiatives throughout the years and supports human development in developing nations with special attention to education. Particularly in Brazil, CDO has helped several excellent projects. Some examples of educational experiences in Brazil are *Obras Educativas Padre Giussani* (Priest Giussani Educational Works) and the *Centro de Educação para o Trabalho Virgílio Resi*, or CEDUC, (Centre for Work Education Virgílio Resi) in Belo Horizonte. In São Paulo, *Centro de Recuperação e Educação Nutricional*, CREN, (Centre for Recovery and Nutritional Education) which is nationally recognized for its contribution against children malnutrition; and in Salvador (Bahia), *Centro Educativo João Paulo II* (Educative Centre John Paul II).



of meaning, beauty, love, truth and justice as an expression of a transcendent imprint that stimulates life from within, has confronted reductionistic and mechanical understandings of persons. Giussani's book "The religious sense" has been studied in psychology departments throughout Brazil through the synthesis of Dr. Miguel Mahfoud, named "Elementary Experience Psychology". Mahfoud (in press) has taken Giussani's philosophical-anthropology based on St. Thomas Aquinas in dialogue with phenomenology, and brought its implications to bear on counselling and clinical psychology. Mahfoud's (in press) superb achievement is not a psychological theory of Giussani's work; but having his anthropology as a foundation, "Elementary Experience Psychology" recognizes authentic human dynamism in order to awaken the elementary and significant aspects of experience.

Conclusion: An Encounter with the Risen Christ

Giussani's (1997) work "The Religious Sense" is followed by the claim that Christ corresponds fully to the heart's infinite desire, as described in his book "At the Origin of the Christian Claim". The existential drama that, in every initiative, seeks what it cannot attain is fulfilled through Christ's self-revelation. As Giussani (1998) points out, "the incarnation is a transcendent response to a human need which great geniuses have always been able to sense" (p. 101). Because God came to walk in the world, his presence is part of every life experience: everything has a sacramental character. Every relationship, action, and fact reveals God. In this articulation Giussani (2004b) quotes Henri De Lubac, saying that for a Christian that knows how to look, everything in the world reveals God, particularly the everyday tasks. Therefore, every work, even if simple or regarded as of low value, is capable of revealing and leading humanity to Christ (Henri de Lubac, quoted by Giussani, 2004b, p. 81).

Luigi Giussani's thought, as well as his life, insisted that Christianity is an encounter with a historical person, Christ, the Word made flesh. His passion for the incarnation took him on an incarnational path, renouncing his position as a theology professor in order to seek an encounter that transformed the experience of his students. He sought to present an integrated view of the Christian life through the Communion and Liberation movement, and emphasized that every aspect of life contains the possibility for authentic experience in the light of Christ's redeeming presence.

The Religious Sense - humanity's original and dramatic nature expressed as a desire for ultimate happiness, truth, beauty and love- is fulfilled through Christ, who became man so the world could encounter God through a personal experience.



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