

# THE 2019 GIUSSANI SERIES ON FAITH AND MODERNITY:

*A Friend on the Road to the Mystery*

# THE 2019 ALBACETE LECTURE ON FAITH AND CULTURE:

*Obeying Our Own Creations: God and  
Disenchantment in Amazon's World*



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I.

**THE 2019 GIUSSANI SERIES on**  
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June 22, 2019  
The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture  
New York City

*With Dr. Timothy O'MALLEY, Director of Education, McGrath Institute for Church Life and Academic Director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy; Editor, Church Life Journal, and Dr. John E. ZUCCHI, Professor of History, McGill University, Translator of The Religious Sense, and Amy SAPENOFF, Moderator*

# A Friend On the Road to the Mystery

**Amy Sapenoff:** On behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center, good evening and welcome to the 4th annual Luigi Giussani Series on Faith and Modernity. An immediate thank you to the Sheen Center for helping organize this event, which each year is an important moment to further discover the ongoing relevance of Fr. Giussani to our current cultural and social milieu. Before moving forward, let's watch a short video on Fr. Giussani's life.

*(video)*

**Sapenoff:** My name is Amy Sapenoff. Tonight's topic, education, is of particular and personal significance to me as I am an educator. However, my life as a teacher exists in two very

different contexts: firstly, as a high school history and government teacher in a distinctly non-Catholic school in Potomac, Maryland; and secondly, as one of the principle coordinators of GS in the United States. GS stands for *Gioventu Studentesca*, or Student Youth. Originally — and it was referenced in the video we just watched — GS was the group established by Fr. Giussani himself after beginning his own career as a teacher, a career he undertook in response to his desire to help young people overcome the perceived gap between faith and daily life. GS communities exist as part of the presence of Communion and Liberation and the enduring legacy of Fr. Giussani in the United States today.

It has only been with the help of Fr. Giussani that I can understand the deep connection between my experience, both inside the classroom with my students and with the high school kids who participate in GS on a weekly basis.

There are two constitutive elements in Giussani's understanding of education: human development and an awareness of the world. Education, then, is best defined as an "introduction into total reality." In his book, *The Risk of Education*, Giussani supplements this definition by saying, "The word *reality* is to the word *education* as the destination is to a journey." As a teacher, there is a promise in these words. Helping my students to pay attention to a particular piece of reality — in my case, American history — is the first step in accompanying them as they discover life's total meaning. It is through the discovery of the world and all that is given to us in our daily experience that human development is achieved.

But education is not merely a matter of acquiring information. There is a wide gap between reality as we perceive it and arriving at life's ultimate meaning. For a true education to take place,

young people have to be given the tools to understand that information, to look at the world and make sense of it in light of their own questions and humanity. Giussani likens the method of education to a student receiving a backpack. I invite you now to watch a clip of Giussani as he describes this more in depth. By the way, you have received with your program the DVD and transcript of the conference from which this clip is taken.

*Video clip:*

**Luigi Giussani:** *I always tell young people that it's quite right that a person is born with one of Aesop's two knapsacks on his back — the reference to Aesop is purely external by the way — and in this knapsack, his parents or others in their place, since they love the child, put everything they believe useful into the bag; it's quite right; it's quite natural, as we said before. But there comes a time when nature itself, this same nature that makes a parent give a child what he feels to be right, pushes the child, or the adolescent by now, to take hold of the knapsack on his back and throw it out in front of him to look inside it. In English we use the word problem, which means exactly "to throw before"; it comes from the Greek pro ballo. He rummages inside to see if what is there is worthwhile, and for this we use another word of Greek origin, crisis or critique (krisis). It means to grasp the reasons, become aware of the reasons, and therefore the limitations or the lack of limitations of a proposal. If a person is not trained in this work, without having made the effort of training in this work, he will grow up to be reactive, with his reactivity being the ultimate criterion — physical or mental reactivity. But if the adult has not gone through this process in some way, or does not learn it when it comes to educating his child, then how will he be able to help the child? In this sense, freedom comes*



*into play, first of all in the figure of the educator. In fact, freedom has first of all to come into play in the attitude the educator takes up regarding the past. How sad is a society in which no one sets out to defend the possibility of communicating one's heritage to the new beings who emerge, because the newspapers, the television, the school, can all create a screen and an insulation that prevents a living contact with the values of the past.*

**Sapenoff:** In thinking about this excerpt from Giussani, many questions emerge. What are these tools that an educator puts in the proverbial child's backpack? How is a child taught to think with this critical awareness? In what ways can a teacher or parent cultivate their own freedom in a world that cares more about teaching "21st century skills" and reduces knowledge to a positivistic analysis of data-points? These are questions that we've invited our panelists to help us to unpack. However, there is a preceding question worth looking at first. Giussani's thoughts on education, the methods that he bequeathed us — are they relevant here and now? Can Giussani help us to educate young people today?

In my experience, the answer to this question is a resounding yes. Over the course of last fall, I worked with a number of GS students from across the country on an exhibit about the life and thought of Fr. Giussani, which we presented this year at the New York Encounter; perhaps you noticed some of the panels displayed around the walls here tonight. The work became a perfect parallel to how Giussani proposes the education of young people: introduce them to a shared history, a life, a tradition, a community, a charisma, accompany them while they allow these provocations and claims to percolate, trust them as they

eventually are prompted to evaluate this proposal against the horizon of their own desires, so that they ultimately arrive at a deepened understanding of both themselves and the faith.

Dozens of students worked on various texts of Fr. Giussani during weekly schools of community, the moment of catechesis and reflection that is part of the life of GS and CL more broadly. Remarkably, it was primarily in communities comprised of students who met GS through teachers in their schools — and not those who first met the charism through their families — that Giussani’s method resonated most intensely.

I’ll share some of their words, speaking in response to Giussani’s words that faith must be relevant to life’s needs. Each of the quotes from the students below gives flesh to Giussani’s observation that “to say that faith exalts our reason is to say that faith corresponds to the fundamental and original needs of the human heart.”

Ella, a freshman in Rockville, Maryland, said: “GS expects more from my life because it makes me see that everything matters. Getting up in the morning and going through the motions is not enough. I’m not always sure of what I’m ultimately looking for, but I want to share experiences together with my friends, and I want these experiences to have a meaning. In other places, Jesus is just talked about as a historical figure; He is distant. GS is more interesting because we can experience God through the lives that we share. Jesus is a person whom I can know in reality. I’m looking for something and He’s going to show me.”

Anthony from Greenville, South Carolina, wrote: “I would say that my faith was a foreign part of my life before GS. I was a good Catholic, but going to Mass and talking about my faith always felt like something separate from my ‘normal’ life. GS taught me

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to recognize this deep absence in my heart, a great longing that pointed to God. Without recognizing this absence, Christ can only help me when I die. Now I want to know, ‘Who is He to me right now, while I try to make myself happy?’ Once I realized that the emptiness and the desire for something more would follow me everywhere, then my faith was no longer foreign. I can now truly say that I need Christ, not just to save me sometime in the future, but because without Him I feel alone in front of the world and my own plans for happiness.”

And the final quote I’ll share is from my friend Maddie in Crosby, Minnesota. It points to the interesting and perhaps unexpected title for tonight’s event: “A Friend on the Road to the Mystery.” She said, “The Movement was born from Fr. Giussani’s love for the destiny of young people. He wanted us young people to fall in love with our lives and to understand the purpose and the reasonableness of the Catholic Church and our faith. Learning about how GS came to be while I’m personally following GS is incredible; as I learn about Fr. Giussani’s life, it’s like Fr. Giussani is telling me that he is in love with my destiny, he feels like my friend. He’s never been so real to me. I’m actually blown away. Reading his biography makes me fall in love with Communion and Liberation and Fr. Giussani!! It’s crazy; I am blown away by what we all have. If it wasn’t for this man, this friend who, by the way, is the most passionate, interesting, and in-love man I’ve ever met, I’m not sure where I would be. Reading about his life makes you experience the weight of the gift of GS for our lives.”

“Reality is to education as destination is to journey.” Fr. Giussani is indeed a friend who has accompanied many of us on the road to the Mystery. He is a father who has educated us.

To learn more about Giussani’s distinctive approach to

education, I'd now like to welcome to the stage our first speaker.

Timothy O'Malley is the Director of Education at the McGrath Institute for Church Life, and Academic Director of the Notre Dame Center for Liturgy. You will find his biography in the program you received.

**Timothy O'Malley:** Ideology, as Don Giussani notes in *The Religious Sense*, is a preconception that takes up one dimension of reality, one aspect of truth, and deforms it into an absolute. In this sense, an ideology becomes a blinder that enables us to perceive the world in but a single way. Only this scientific theory can explain reality! Only this economic proposal! Only this!

Catholic formation — a broader term that will include education within the schools but also life within the parish and the home — in the last twenty-five years has suffered from such an ideological blinding.

This inability to think coherently about the task of Catholic formation is the result of a certain exaggerated account of experience. In this account, “experience” is at odds with the language of Tradition or doctrine. The important thing is that people have an experience, not that they believe in the Trinity, understand Catholic social doctrine, or grasp the main rudiments of Christian history. Texts and ideas are but ciphers to the true source of education — the category of experience.

This approach to experience has influenced Catholicism's understanding of divine Revelation. The ideology of experience enters the very account of divine Revelation, whereby every man or woman must measure the veracity of the Christian event according to his or her experience. If my experience is different than what the Tradition proposes, then the Tradition will need to be changed, augmented, or left behind for the sake of my

experience. Mutual critical-correlation becomes the privileged method of the Christian, where divine Revelation and human life critique one another. My life has something to say to Christian Tradition, and Christian Tradition has something to say to my life. It's up to me, the individual, to determine what.

Of course, there are problems with this account of experience. First, it passes over the fundamental meaning of experience. Experience is not a category that the human person undergoes in certain instances. To be human from the very beginning is to "have experiences." It is to see, taste, touch, feel, smell, conceive, grasp, understand, imagine, remember, and will. All of this is part of human experience. And therefore, there is never an encounter with the Tradition that is not itself already an experience for the person who engages in this encounter. When we proclaim that "God is love," the very utterance is already an experience. When we proclaim the preferential option for the poor, that is already an experience.

Second, it also places the individual experience as the primary referee of the entire Tradition. It is the isolated monad who becomes the prime "judge" of the Tradition, who determines what is in or what is out. It is assumed that the Tradition is itself simply a series of ideas that the knower can construct or deconstruct on his or her own. Yet, the Tradition is not that! It is already the echo of a wisdom that comes from Christ down the ages. It is the result of a common experience that precedes the individual. In this sense, the individual must encounter what is proposed within the Tradition. But the individual must understand that this encounter is itself a meeting of the individual person with a community.

The ideology of experience is not the only blinder found in Catholic formation in the present. Some years ago, I remember a

priest saying that good catechesis, good Catholic education, was akin to teaching a parrot to speak. The parrot is to repeat after the one speaking, memorizing everything, gaining the capacity to give oneself over to a Tradition, a text, an idea before one needs to think about it.

But human beings are not parrots! The young child, even the infant, doesn't just learn to speak without a kind of thinking, an experience of the body given over to the speech-act. The young child learns to speak because he or she gazes upon the mouth of the beloved mother and father. There, in this act of love, they see the movement of lips. They take up the texts that are important, even sacred, for this mother and father. Love precedes the act of imitation. Experience and Tradition, love and speech are united together from the beginning.

Don Giussani's educational proposal offers a way out of this bifurcation between experience and Tradition, between love and text. He does so not by pursuing a *via media*, emphasizing that we need both love and text, the experience and the Tradition. Instead, he has a proper understanding of the educative act based around an encounter with the mystery of reality. Such an encounter does not unfold apart from a Tradition, a series of hypotheses given to us by the men and women who proposed this Tradition for us. This encounter with reality is never experienced as a series of isolated monads but always in a communion of inquiry, a series of friendships that enable us to face the real.

We hear this most fully in *The Risk of Education*. He writes:

*Every single element of the essential dynamism of the educational trajectory is undeniably marked by reality: its perspectives, its modalities, and its fabric of interconnections. Reality shapes this trajectory and dominates it—it shapes it from*

*its origins, and it dominates it as its end. Any educational method that maintains even a modicum of loyalty to evidence must both recognize and, in some way, engage with this 'reality' (26).*

In this sense, the educational act, the act of formation, does not relate first and foremost to either experience or Tradition. Instead, it is about facing reality for what it is, to see the gift of existence as gift. This means to know, to be reasonable.

Of course, the Tradition, the text, the hypothesis offered by the authority of our forebears, embodied in the life of the teacher has a proposal for us. We are not searching for this reality on our own. The text that comes to us, the doctrines given to us, all of these orient us toward the "real." At times, they may be the only thing that can orient us aright. We can gaze at the world, see what is around us, and come to the conclusion that there is no meaning. Or, we can be told that "God is Love." That the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And that will change the very orientation that we have to existence. If it's true, if it's coherent, then it changes all.

What's the authority that would enable one to claim this? After all, there are competing claims. Not everyone believes the Word became flesh. The task in this instance is to embody in the life of the educator, in the life of the communion of the Church, even in the life of the family that this hypothesis is total. It affects every dimension of being human, every decision that is made. Everything.

And the teacher, the parent, the authority figure is not excluded from this occasion of encounter. After all, the teacher and the parent are not bestowing a reality to the student that they've mastered. Instead, they are facing the reality together, seeing anew what the gift of existence can mean.

Here, I want to show what such an act of education might look like in two very different modes. First, a trip to the Cloisters; and second, the encounter with a dead bird.

Today, I went out to the Cloisters, reading Don Giussani as I went along. In this strangest of settings, a kind of medieval paradise captured in northern Manhattan, I saw altarpieces, relics, statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary and the Christ child, and more. In gazing at these images, I was not just having an experience. Nor for that matter was I simply “thinking.” Rather, it was an encounter with reality, an educative act, that was informed by a hypothesized experience. To the one who wandered the Cloisters looking for nice plants, to run around the gardens, to “see” what is famous, they had their encounters. But to the one who came in aware of the proposal at the heart of the Cloisters, that the Word did become flesh, one saw a series of “educational acts” by forebears. The way that the Blessed Virgin Mary looked at her dying son gave to me an experience of what it means to die. It offered me to something to see, a provocation that forced me to ask myself where my gaze is directed. An act of education was being performed without a formal teacher apart from the material. But the authority of the place allowed me to face reality, to see what was proposed by our forebears. It is my task, amid my ecclesial community, to put this into practice.

Also, last week, my son and I encountered a dead bird. It was a baby, fallen from its nest on our driveway. My family made it clear that it was my job to remove this bird. As we lifted the bird, it became an occasion to talk to my son about the meaning of death. We prayed for the bird. We talked a bit about the care and respect that we treat those who have died. And we explained to our family the nature of our encounter.



Such an act of education is never exclusively a matter of experience, a matter of Tradition. Rather, it is a facing of reality, a seeing of what is. Dare I say that cultural renewal in our time will need to become an occasion not of a kind of cultural traditionalism that turns the text into our salvation. We must face the real, the reality of the enfleshment of the Word. There will be texts and ideas involved in this process. But there will also be the mutual seeking of love. Together. In families, in schools, and in communities dedicated to the real.

**Sapenoff:** Our next speaker is Dr. John Zucchi. Dr. Zucchi is a professor and a past chair in the Department of History and Classical Studies at McGill University, and former Senior Editor with McGill-Queen's University Press. You will find his biography in the program you received.

**John Zucchi:** There is a passage in the Gospel of St. John, in the twenty-first chapter, that always strikes me whenever I read it or hear it. It recounts when Christ appears to some of the apostles after the Resurrection, and they have been fishing all night. Jesus asks them if they have caught anything and they reply that they have not. So He tells them to throw the net to the starboard and they will catch something. The apostles are not able to haul in the net because of the quantity of fish. St. John, the writer of the Gospel, recognizes the Lord and tells Peter. Peter, who had nothing on, ties his outer garment about him and jumps into the water. In the meantime, the other disciples come close to the shore with the boat, towing the net. Jesus asks them to bring some of the fish they have caught, and Simon Peter goes onboard, takes the net and drags it to the shore. Now here is what always sticks out for me when I read this passage. It is not by any means the most important question — far from it! John lets us know that

there were 153 fish in the net.

Isn't it curious that he should have noted this? Some biblical scholars have suggested that the number 153 might be symbolic, although no one seems to know what the number is supposed to represent. But let us suppose that the disciples had merely counted the fish. What were they doing? The most significant being in their lives was standing before them. Peter was astounded to see the Lord; he also bore the shame of his denial three times as Christ went to his death. We are about to enter the famous dialogue in which Christ asks Peter if he loves Him. And the disciples are counting *fish*?! Evidently, John still finds the fact significant enough to report it in what becomes the fourth Gospel many years later.

But isn't it odd that in the face of that Man who drew them ever deeper into Mystery, the infinite, into something else, beyond, unimaginable, the disciples should have been worrying about such finite matters as how many fish were in the nets? Were they trying to measure the greatness of that instant with Christ with another yardstick? Perhaps.

It is also striking that John should find that insignificant detail significant enough to relate it as a very old man. Perhaps it was a kind of detail that served as an entry point, a way of quickly recalling the much more significant event of the encounter that morning with Christ.

In a sense that is what I am going to do this evening. I am going to tell you about some insignificant, banal details, which however bear their own significance. Of the many moments I had to meet Fr. Giussani, in person, through books, or through others, the few episodes I will tell you have no great significance on the one hand, but are crucial for me in that they are reference points

by which I remember key ways in which Fr. Giussani educated me.

I was 28 years old when I came across Fr. Giussani. I did not meet him directly but through a friend and a group of friends. From what they told me, I knew that he was someone very intelligent. They certainly spoke about him with great enthusiasm. I had always grown up in the faith but had never really had fundamental reasons for that faith. In the months before I met Fr. Giussani, I had the sense that I might leave the faith eventually. Here was my dilemma: there was a disconnect between the life I was living and the way of the world. I loved that world. I still love it. I was attracted to many people within it. I had grown up in it. But in a certain sense I was like a spectator in that world, a visitor. The only solution I could find was to live a very personal, individualistic, consumer-type of Catholicism. How odd, because that made me a kind of visitor in what was supposed to be my home world. I did not have to choose or commit to anything or anyone. I could manage my faith life, my moral life, prayer life, etc. — and not need to develop relationships that deeply informed the way I lived every aspect of life. That could not hold up in the long run. I distinctly remembered thinking: *Well, perhaps that is the way things are; one grows up, gets an education and then is guided by other principles.*

In all this I felt a certain unease. I recall I had a very urgent need to meet true friends with whom I could speak about things that truly mattered. Perhaps I perceived, deep down, that something had to break through that mind-set with which I faced life. This occurred in two steps.

1. Those first friends I met when I was 28 years old were so different from other people I had met. Here I was, a Catholic for many years, and I thought I knew so much about the faith, about

the Church, about Christ, about the Gospels. And there were these people that I met who did not seem to know a great deal about the Gospels. Rather they seemed to identify with the life of the Gospels; they seemed to partake in that life. When I would ask them why that was, they referred to this friendship they lived that began with Fr. Giussani. This experience was fundamental for me, but it did not yet convince me that Fr. Giussani was anything more than intelligent.

2. I fell in love with one of these first people I met, the one who struck me the most for her way of being. The problem was she had chosen to follow a particular vocational path of commitment to Christ that involved the celibate life. She spoke to Fr. Giussani, telling him that she too was in love and she told him that she would keep a distance from me and to do so would even change some of her career plans. Fr. Giussani suggested to her that changing her career plans might not resolve anything, and that ending the friendship with me wouldn't either. He suggested that she go deeper into a friendship with me but always with a consideration for her ultimate vocation. I could not believe that a priest should say this! I had been expecting him to warn my friend to avoid the relationship because it might thwart her vocational path. That's what I expected a priest to do, to react in a moralistic fashion.

I still had not met Fr. Giussani, but I already understood that this man was not "merely" intelligent; there was something exceptional about him that I could not put my finger on. I also understood two things day: that woman had to follow her vocation and I could not be an obstacle to her path; secondly, I understood in my heart of hearts that the path Fr. Giussani had traced, this strange movement, Communion and Liberation, was a path for

me. It was not only that the questions I had about my life, about the purpose of this life, its meaning, my desires — finally saw the possibility of a response. It was also that the questions and the desires seemed to grow ever greater.

So I had made a decision for my life, not formally but in an existential way, if I can put it that way. Then I had my life to live. I did not tell you earlier that my encounter with those friends took place while I was doing a two-year post-doc in Cambridge, England. I came back to Canada and desired to continue to live the same life upon my return. I remember asking Fr. Giussani about this. I had all sorts of ideas for “starting a community.” And I shared them with Fr. Giussani, who I thought might appreciate them and even give me some more. I still blush when I think about all this. He was kind, but it was clear he could not care less about those ideas. He just repeated the same thing a few times: Do this or do that — the ideas that I suggested to him — “only if it makes you happy.” That’s all he could tell me. To put it another way, do what corresponds with your heart. Here I was, organizing — counting those 153 fish — while he was telling me simply to follow my heart. And so I started my university career simply enjoying: loving the new work of teaching, the work of research and writing. And I began to meet people with whom I began to share the same path.

But I needed reminding along this path. I would speak to Fr. Giussani on the phone from time to time, and when I told him that the community had begun in Montreal, he enthusiastically said that he was going to be in the States in a few months and he would come and visit me. I thought this was a golden opportunity to organize public talks with him, invite all sorts of people to listen to him, etc. I began working at this project and then called him

one day to tell him about what I had done. My goodness was he ever irritated with me! He told me that he did not want to do any public meetings. “I am coming for *you*,” he said. “I am only coming to visit *you*.” What a shock that was for me. He was coming for me? Who was I? I was this guy organizing things all the time. Full of plans and projects. But he wasn’t coming for that fellow. He was coming for *me*. It raised a question in me. Who was I? Who am I that I should be loved in this way? It also raised the question for me of who was that man? I did not really know much about him, yet he was a father to me, and that relationship with him allowed me to have a glimpse of something else, someone else as I never had before.

I had the fortune of seeing him quite often in the following years, despite the fact that he was geographically so far from me. I would perhaps see him two or three times a year and speak with him on the phone every few weeks or months, depending on the year. I was educated by Fr. Giussani during those years, first of all by living the life of the Church through the Movement of CL. The friendship with Fr. Giussani had made me understand that the things that I had learned through him, through his writings and through the life of the community, could only be tested in a locus, in a dwelling place, by participating in the life of the community. At best, on my own, without a dwelling place, I would be merely organizing things — counting fish, as it were — and not seeing their import for my life.

When I would see Fr. Giussani in those later years, I had the clear sense that he was guiding me ever deeper into understanding that everything, everything in life spoke about the Mystery of Christ, about His mysterious presence. He also made me understand how, in all of this, there was nothing more important

than my life, or better still, than my “I,” because I was relationship with that Mystery. It was as if he were gradually bringing me to another world, another horizon. He did not teach me this as a kind of lesson. He simply communicated it to me through his life, in a relationship, with simple words, with a kind attention to me, or with a simple gesture.

Let me tell you about two of these episodes. One was in November 1996. I was in Milan for a conference and I went to see him at his office. I waited for perhaps two hours to see him, but he was busy with someone else, and in the end asked his secretary to ask me if instead I could meet him for lunch the next day. I was thrilled! A chance to stay with him a bit longer! I went to see him the next day for lunch and was asked to wait for him in his library, where a little dining table had been set up. He walked into the room weeping and asked me to forgive him for having made me wait so long for him. I told him that on the contrary I was so happy to be able to see him for lunch instead. He embraced me for what was probably a minute but seemed like a half-hour. And in the midst of this embrace he once again asked me to forgive him, because he was a bit emotional: he had received some difficult news. And then in the midst of that embrace he said: “I think I can understand a bit of what must have been the nature of the relationship between Jesus and St. John.”

This was a decisive moment for me for a number of reasons, which became clear to me, not instantly, but in contemplating them over the years. I mentioned earlier that I could never breach the divide between two worlds, the world of my faith and the world out there. My freedom was hampered by this outlook. The Word was made flesh, but only in the private sphere, which means effectively that it never happened. Fr. Giussani opened a path for

me. Nothing needed to be left out, censured. Everything reminded him of Christ's presence. Even a simple embrace with a nobody could remind him of that relationship between Jesus and John. And so it became simpler for me to live my day-to-day life. I grew to love my work, my students, my colleagues, my research all the more. Dull administrative tasks were no longer thus, for they too were something asked of me and which could help me to glimpse Someone Else the way Giussani had done in that embrace. This became fundamental for my life and I am forever grateful to Fr. Giussani for this. I remember that when I began my university career, I thought that I would be washed out in my later years of teaching and research. How long could all that go on? And here I find myself in the final years of my career and I have never been happier or more enthusiastic about teaching and research, about my relationship with students and colleagues. And this is no small thing.

In that embrace with Giussani I also learned one other important lesson: the way Fr. Giussani was with me that day, he was with everyone at all times. For him, I was everything in that instant. But he was like that with everyone. Everyone represented for him the presence of the Mystery, drew him to the Mystery in the instant. And gradually, with a million shortfalls on my part, I was able to understand that this ideal he lived was possible for me as well, in my relationship with my wife, children, friends, colleagues, students, street people, maintenance workers, handymen, neighbors. That in the instant, in a relationship with someone, it is possible to detect a correspondence that reminds me of an Other.

As Fr. Giussani drew me ever deeper into his perception of Mystery, into the relationship with God, he made me ever



more aware of who I was, of my dignity. And it was never a theoretical proposition but a realization that came through in the relationship. I remember once I expressed to him my unease at having a responsibility in the Movement of CL, that I was only discovering how great this experience of the Movement was, and how I really knew nothing about it. He looked at me very seriously and said, “No you intuited everything at the beginning, with the encounter; you have the rest of your life to understand it.” This struck me because it made me understand that, when I had my encounter in England years before, I indeed had intuited everything in an instant. The perception that the Mystery of the incarnation was not just an idea but something that had reached me had become clear. That I should have had that perception was to have reached another, as it were, level of knowledge. But because it was so deep and mysterious, the rest of my life would be dedicated to testing it, verifying it in my everyday life. This allowed for a new tenderness for myself: despite all my shortcomings, sin, miserliness in my outlook, selfishness, I — like any human being — was still that point that could become aware of Mystery, that could be in relationship with that Mystery.

The last time I encountered Fr. Giussani was on August 25th, 2004, a few months before his death. My wife and I went to see him, and he was very frail at that point and could barely speak. I have never said publicly what he told me because I thought it was too personal. And yet now I feel that I can say his last words to me, because in fact what he said to me is what he said in his heart to every person he met, as I now say it to you. I could not understand him and he repeated three times the phrase: “The heavens will rejoice that you existed.” It is like an echo of St. Irenaeus: “The glory of God is man fully alive.” That phrase has been like a final

testament for me from Fr. Giussani, a reminder that that little detail — like those 153 fish — is more than an insignificant detail. My wife often reminds me of Fr. Giussani's phrase when I get up on the wrong side of bed: "How can you be that way when a saint said that to you?" It's true: when we know that we are loved to the point that one even should remind us of it, how it changes us! I can commit a thousand wrongs, but nothing can erase the new affection and tenderness for myself, if I stay in that relationship. This was all made possible only because someone loved me in such a deep way that, along the long path of friendship, he made me aware of how much the Creator loved me by willing me into existence.

#### **Q&A**

**Sapenoff:** Thank you so much to both of you for your comments. We'll go ahead and launch right into a short question and answer session, even though there are many, many questions that I would like to ask.

Tim, I think I'll start with you. It occurred to me while listening to your comments that to face anything ideologically would be to be unfree. You would have to be very rigid and adhering to this system that seems to exist. Instead, you say that education, particularly in the faith, allows us to face reality as it is, and there's actually a great deal of freedom that's implied here. Regardless of the circumstances, one can be free and able to face reality. This is very interesting in the context of education. I as a high school teacher, and I would imagine the two of you as university professors, see a growing amount of anxiety in students, an inability to face reality. I think that this concept of freedom is really relevant to that. In the video clip of Giussani, he references the

concept of freedom, that for an educator to propose a tradition, they themselves need to be free. So I'm wondering if you could speak a little bit about this concept of freedom within Giussani's educational proposal and how it might be cultivated.

**O'Malley:** Let me begin with my students as a sort of concrete form of this. In some ways, the greatest ideology that they're faced with is that they're not free, that actually they have been given a task by nature that they cannot break apart from. I teach this course on marriage and family which is now at 250 undergraduates, which was a bit of a surprise on my part because we're basically reading a history of Christian texts on marriage and family. It's not the "sexiest" of topics, and yet what I find is that they feel forced into careers. They have been taught through their parents, sometimes through the university, that the purpose of an education is some sort of free-floating signifier of excellence and success, and they feel like they can't do anything beyond that. And so for me this freedom is what you find in Giussani, and in John Paul II, and also in Blondell, who inspired both John Paul II and Giussani. This sense that the human being or the human person can act, and that our lives are not determined, and that actually our actions have a meaning in the world. There's a sort of freeing action in this. We can act and be free in this, and move and have our being in a distinctive kind of way. And so how do I do this with my students? Often it's challenging. It's asking them to examine the very cultural conceptions they think they have. A number of them will say, "Well, I must be very old before I can start a family because I cannot afford it." And the question I always ask them is: How much does it take to raise a kid? I don't ask them how much it takes to send your kid to preschool on the Upper East Side, but I say, "How much does it take to raise a kid well,

to educate a kid?” And it challenges them to say, “Well, perhaps this actually is a possibility.” So in that sense, the act of education is a freedom, because it forces them to examine their ideologies and to recognize that the world they assume is true is not actually the world as it is. And I always am very particular with this and experiential. I describe my own life with my kids, my family. I want them to see that this is the freeing life, that you can actually live this life, and in that sense I, as professor, break down all sorts of boundaries I’m not technically supposed to break down. I’m not supposed to be this objective, this committed to the personal life, and yet suddenly they see that I am.

**Sapenoff:** John, I wonder if you can comment on that as well, because I can’t think of a greater experience of freedom than to be told by someone — someone you know deeply loves you — that the heavens will rejoice that you existed. So how did Fr. Giussani help you to discover your own freedom?

**Zucchi:** I was actually going to comment on the first question, if you don’t mind. I was struck by what Tim was saying about the students and how they have their own conceptions of what they should or shouldn’t be doing, and getting married at 40 or whatever. But reality is not that, as Tim said. I was thinking how, in fact, it’s even true when it comes to helping students in their own work studies research. I teach history. I do social history a great deal, and we’re looking at the past. Students will try to devise all sorts of theories, ways, approaches to understanding the past, but I’m always reminding them that their idea of the past isn’t reality itself; reality is much greater than the idea you might have of the past as you see it, in the same way they have these ideas of the future, which is not reality. Also, the ideas of the past don’t really represent that past; it’s a mystery. That was one way Fr. Giussani

helped me a great deal in my own research, and I try to pass this on to my own students as well.

**Sapenoff:** Thank you. John, you spoke of education as a relationship between you and Fr. Giussani. To be educated by Fr. Giussani was to be in a relationship with him. And certainly, Tim, you've also now spoken a great deal about your relationship with your students. I was wondering if both of you could talk more about this, because education is so relational, and we've spoken about some of the fruits it promises for students. What might some of the fruits be for educators, for teachers? And I know, Tim, you alluded to this, that when you're teaching Augustine to your students and helping them to discover that piece of reality, it becomes new for you again. I would love to tease that out a little bit more. What are the fruits of this method for the teacher?

**Zucchi:** Relationship is fundamental. I often tell students, though I don't put it precisely in these words, that the material we're studying is kind of a pretext for a deeper relationship, and also a help for them to look at their own lives in a deeper way. One of the things, for example, that I really hammer away at with my students is that, if they want to take my class, they have to be there. They can't sit there and watch a video of a class afterwards. First, because I don't do videos for classes, so they can't watch me afterwards. I want them to be there because I want them in that relationship. I ask them at the beginning of the term to come and see me, because I want to meet each one of them. I want each one of them to know that they are not merely a student in my class, that they're first of all human beings and therefore in a relationship. I want to know who they are. I want to know where they're from. I want to know about them. I want them to know that I am interested in them *because I am interested in them*. I've

been loved in that way and I want to approach my students in that very same way, because any discovery I've made, whether in life or in teaching or research, always emerges as the fruit of a relationship I've had with someone else; someone else kind of drew me back and allowed me to see the bigger picture.

On this point, do you mind if I tell another anecdote about Fr. Giussani? There was one fellow I was very close to. He left Montreal many years ago, but we used to meet quite often and we'd just have these very deep conversations that would move me very much. I went to see Fr. Giussani about this. I said to him, "Fr. Giussani, I have these conversations with this fellow and it seems as if we go deeper and deeper into the mystery, that we delve ever deeper into the mystery in these conversations." And Fr. Giussani said, "Oh, you experience that too!" Of course I just started to laugh and maybe I said, "Listen, whatever I experience is nothing like what you must experience." And he looked at me very seriously and said, "The only reason that you experience that is because you're not a priest." And I said, "What do you mean by that?" He goes, "Because that vocation was not asked of you; you have a particular vocation that was asked of you. Living your vocation gave you this possibility of delving deeper into the mystery." So our being able, either as students, to be able to understand the subject matter better, or as human beings, to have a deeper relationship with that mystery is not the result of some technical ability, some little plan, some little theory you can put into practice. But there's always a relationship involved, and it's connected to everything else out there, including our vocation.

**O'Malley:** Obviously I think the biggest surprise for me as a teacher is that, you know, we gather around texts, and I learned from my students quite literally around texts. They have brilliant

insights, and I grow to appreciate them more and more, but the greatest gift to me as a teacher in the last six years is that it's made me a better dad, and I've paid attention to that. My students have taught me how to be a dad, because when you become a dad — both our children are adopted and so we had very little time to know that they were coming at all — you have very little preparation time insofar as the child is a sort of abstraction for you. But then the child exists, the child is there, and you don't really know what you're doing. And what I found is that I became a better dad through listening to my students and sitting with them through their anxiety. I was formed to initially presume that, when they came to office hours, that my job was to help them fix their problem with their work. Now I'm happy to just be there with them as they talk for fifteen to twenty minutes about their life and ask me about this girl they're dating or this guy they're dating, and they don't know what's going to happen with it. I just sit there with them and give a bit of advice, but mostly be a person who's ahead of them. And I'm okay with that. Likewise, my own children taught me to be a better teacher, because I used to sort of secretly rejoice in terrible grades. As any teacher knows, you think, *At last I come to give you the judgment you deserve*. What I've actually learned through my kids is patience with my students. What's so shocking to me as a teacher is how much I've learned to be human, and to be both a better dad and a better teacher, mutually together, through the attention to dwelling with, to communion.

**Sapenoff:** Actually this is leading me to my next question, because it's beautiful that this process of education, this method of relationship as education, allows experiences to become new. And so to educate your children allows the experience of teaching your students to become new. Teaching your students allows the

experience of being a father in some ways to become new, and this newness is something that both of you also touched on in your remarks, this possibility of always encountering reality in a different way, the way that it's given to us in this particular set of circumstances on this particular day. Allowing ourselves to be impacted by that really means that everything can always be new. We can think of the past in a different way than we expected. We can think of the future in a different way than we expected. How does this newness become a new awareness for us? How do we remain open to always being challenged to change, to convert, to accept the newness that's implied in Fr. Giussani's method?

**Zucchi:** Two things come to mind for me. One is that newness is not possible if I don't have a place where I can belong, depend. I become very reductive about any newness that enters my life unless I perceive myself as belonging to something ever greater. There is this passage from J.D. Salinger. I always love to teach "De Daumier-Smith's Blue Period." It's a short story by him where an art teacher asks three students to send him their pictures. Two of the students send some crazy photographs of themselves with strange poses. The third student is a nun, and she sends a picture of her convent. I thought that was the most beautiful expression of belonging because when one belongs, when I belong, when I perceive myself as belonging to specific people, the ways I depend on this relationship with Fr. Giussani, with my friends in the community, for example — they help me. They allow me constantly to raise my gaze and not to reduce the newness that enters my life, but to recognize it for what it is.

**O'Malley:** For me, the world would be a series of disintegrated random moments every day if I didn't have a center, and for me that center is the memory of the Church that I ground myself in



through prayer, specifically the Liturgy of the Hours, and the fact that I can recognize the newness that occurs each day as part of a divine providential plan, as part of a divine story. If everything were new, my life would be dreadfully disconnected; but because I ground myself in habits and ritual practices that actually enable me to have a grounding, I'm no longer adrift. I've prayed the same Psalms a million times over, yet every time I pray these Psalms they bring me back, they reawaken me to the newness that could happen that day. Without the grounding in that which is old, the newness would be random; but with the grounding in the old, in the memory, the newness is a sign of divine life unfolding here and now.

**Sapenoff:** Beautiful! Thank you so much. In our discussion tonight, we've barely scratched the surface of what Giussani has to offer on the topic of education today. There's always something more to discover. So with that being said, I'd really like to thank both Tim and John for joining us.

**II.**

**THE 2019 ALBACETE LECTURE on**  
**Faith and Culture:**  
***Obeying Our Own Creations: God and***  
***Disenchantment in Amazon's World***



October 14, 2019  
The Sheen Center for Thought and Culture  
New York City

*With William T. CAVANAUGH, Professor of Catholic Studies and Director of the Center for World Catholicism and Intercultural Theology at DePaul University. His degrees are from the universities of Notre Dame, Cambridge, and Duke. He is the author of seven books and editor of four more.*

# **Obeying Our Own Creations: God and Disenchantment in Amazon's World**

Ninety-nine years ago, the same year he died, the famed German sociologist Max Weber published a revised edition of his classic work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. Inserted into the new edition were a few uses of the word *Entzauberung*, a word that did not appear in the original version. The word was meant to describe the general condition of the modern Western world. *Zauber* is the German word for “magic”;

*Entzauberung* is literally the “un-magic-ing” of the world. It is usually translated “disenchantment,” and — though used sparingly by Weber — the word has taken on a life of its own. It is generally regarded as capturing something essential about life in our present condition. In his exploration of the causes of secularization in the West, Charles Taylor — author of the magisterial 800-page doorstop entitled *A Secular Age* — has written: “Everyone can agree that one of the big differences between us and our ancestors of 500 years ago is that they lived in an ‘enchanted’ world and we do not.” Our ancestors lived in a world inhabited by gods and demons and ghosts and angels and wood sprites and saints. It was a world in which the boundaries between the material and the spiritual were permeable, and the immanent world made frequent contact with the transcendent. The world was full of what Taylor calls “charged objects,” such as saints’ relics that had the power to alter reality. Today, the story goes, we live in a disenchanted world, devoid of divine or demonic spirits, devoid of mystery, and devoid of an ordered meaning.

In Weber’s view, disenchantment was the end result of a long process of rationalization, of which science and capitalism were the principal drivers. Weber was himself a rationalist, who confessed himself “unmusical” with regard to religion. But Weber did not simply celebrate the process of rationalization and disenchantment. He thought that the technical advances of modernity came at a price. Weber feared that modern people had become “specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved.” Weber’s famous book ends with a melancholy description of the “iron cage” of modernity, a heartlessly efficient machine from which all enchantment had been ruthlessly

eliminated, for better and for worse.

For an example of such a machine, I would like to suggest a visit to an Amazon warehouse. In his wildest dreams or nightmares, Max Weber could not have foreseen the lengths to which rationalization has been taken in an Amazon “fulfillment center.” There, poorly-paid “associates,” who are often temporary workers with no benefits, scurry among the bins retrieving and packing just about anything that can be imagined. Warehouses can be stifling in the summer, freezing in the winter. A handheld device keeps track of the workers’ movements. It directs them to the next item to pick, and a timer starts: 27 seconds to scan in the next item four aisles over, for example. The device warns them if they are falling behind, and keeps track of their pick rate. Falling behind, calling in sick, and other offenses can cost a worker their job, so some “associates” have resorted to urinating in bottles to avoid taking bathroom breaks.

In January 2018, Amazon received patents on a wristband that can track a warehouse worker’s arm movements. Responding to the negative reaction, an Amazon spokesperson presented the wristband as a liberating boon for workers: “The speculation about this patent is misguided...This idea, if implemented in the future, would improve the process for our fulfillment associates. By moving equipment to associates’ wrists, we could free up their hands from scanners and their eyes from computer screens.” But according to James Bloodworth, who worked at an Amazon fulfillment center for six months, the real goal is not liberation of human beings but liberation *from* human beings, either by turning them into robots or replacing them with robots. “It was all obsessed with productivity, even going to the bathroom. People were told off for taking five minutes to go to the bathroom. They

started treating human beings as robots, essentially. If it proves cheaper to replace humans with machines, I assume they will do that.” In the Amazon warehouse, Weber’s description of the “iron cage” seems fully vindicated.

But so far I have only been telling one side of the story. The other side of the story has to do not with production and productivity, but with consumption. This is where the rest of us enter the picture. For the consumer, the purchase of nearly anything via Amazon is hardly short of magical. Images of millions of products can be summoned onto a screen. The viewer can spend hours lost in a virtual environment of endless abundance, immersed in images of almost any material product you can imagine. Then you simply make a few clicks, and the desired product appears on your doorstep, like magic, within a day or two. If you have the money, or at least the access to credit, almost anything from anywhere in the world can be summoned out of thin air to materialize at your home. The entire production process of sourcing raw materials and manufacturing and transportation and packing and order fulfillment and delivery is invisible to the consumer, as are the people involved in those processes. The dirt and the sweat and the blood and the tears necessary to create and move products as cheaply and efficiently as possible are hidden from the consumer. All we see are images of the shiny finished products, and the products desired can be made simply to appear — abracadabra! — at our homes. And the prices the consumer pays are often fantastically cheap; the ruthless efficiency of the production and delivery process is driven by the need to sell to the consumer at the lowest price possible.

So it seems that there are two sides to the modern economy, a rationalized, disenchanting one typified by heartless efficiency,

and an enchanted one still filled with charged objects and magic. Tonight, I am going to explore the possibility that these are two sides of the same coin, and I will explore this idea through three sources that make for very strange bedfellows: Max Weber, Karl Marx, and the Bible. I will first argue that, contrary to the usual reading of him, Weber himself could not shake free of the idea that modernity was haunted by enchantment in capitalist production. I will then examine enchantment in consumption through Marx's idea of commodity fetishism. Finally, I will argue that the biblical concept of idolatry captures what both Weber and Marx struggled to articulate and to cure.

### **Production**

The tale Weber tells about the disenchantment of the world is complicated, but I'm going to summarize it in a few steps: 1) religion is the original agent of rationalization, but 2) rationalization eventually pushes religion out of the public sphere. Most uses of Weber stop there, at the disenchantment of the world. But Weber also implies that 3) rationalization produces a new form of enchantment, a kind of "polytheism" of impersonal gods, which include the state and the market.

Let's begin with step 1). Weber regards magic as a primitive form of religion. Early cultures practiced magic to try to control nature and mitigate its various dangers; if we perform a certain dance, it will bring needed rain on our crops. Magic was this-worldly, naturalistic, concerned with manipulating the elemental forces of nature. It was not ethical, therefore, but transactional; magic tried to coerce or bribe the spirits that lived in or behind material things. There is a sort of rationality in this *quid pro quo* view of the universe. When the great salvation religions



erupted in the Axial Age, however, they introduced a new kind of rationalization. The gods were now personal, otherworldly, transcending the material world, and interactions with them took on an ethical tone. Such gods were universal rather than local, and this gave rise to the notion of stable and universal laws that govern natural and social phenomena. This type of rational social order was complemented by an intellectual order, in which the human need for coherent meaning was answered. People needed a way to deal with senseless suffering. So salvation religions developed the myth of a savior and an ethical system, in which the gods could punish the unjust and reward the righteous. Since so often in this life the righteous suffered and the unjust prospered, explanations were sought outside of the life of the present world. Present suffering was explained by sin committed in a former life or by one's ancestors, or belief in the afterlife was posited to ensure that the guilty were punished and the righteous rewarded. In both cases a satisfactory theodicy necessitated appeal to a world beyond the present world as we know it.

Crucially for Weber, this puts salvation religions in a state of permanent tension with the world, which leads to step 2). The more rationalized religion becomes, the more otherworldly it becomes, and the worldly spheres of politics, economics, family, sex, etc. take on increasing worldly autonomy. Mere worldly activity like business and war cannot meet the high ethical standards of the great ethical religions, so the religious person either flees the world in mysticism or becomes a worldly ascetic, like the Puritan, who Weber says accepts the ultimate meaninglessness of the world but tries to work out his salvation in inner dialogue with God while following his worldly vocation as a businessman. Protestantism leads to capitalism. For the Puritan,

argues Weber, the Catholic sacraments were mere magic, an attempt to manipulate God. The Reformation, says Weber, swept the world clean of such idols, so that God would be all in all. But eliminating God from the material world to protect the holiness of God would eventually lead to a disenchanted world where worldly pursuits such as economics and science and politics would be autonomous and deal only in facts, not values.

I am simplifying a long and complex story here, but Weber basically argues that salvation religions rationalize suffering by positing an otherworldly sphere. This leads to a split between this world and the other world, between facts and values, that eventually pushes religion to the private sphere of values and leaves an autonomous disenchanted world of fact governed by science, the state, and the capitalist market. So here we are in the iron cage. Science deals only in facts; it cannot produce meaning. Capitalism responds to whatever the market dictates; values are irrelevant to it. The bureaucracy of the state seeks efficiency; it does not respond to the will of God.

For a lot of people, what they know of Weber ends there, in disenchantment, the elimination of magic from the world. But Weber takes a third step 3), and writes not only of the godlessness of the modern world, but also of a resurgent kind of what he calls “polytheism.” It has to do with his conviction that humans have an elemental need for meaning. For Weber, the split between fact and meaning or value is both a fact and a serious problem, because we urgently want to know what the meaning of our lives is. According to Weber, “Science is meaningless, because it gives no answer to our question, the only question important for us: ‘What shall we do and how shall we live?’” Weber rejects the idea that we can return to religion; he regards that route as

suitable only for the person too weak to face “the fundamental fact that he is destined to live in a godless and prophetless time.” But Weber translates the question “What shall we do and how shall we live?” into “Which of the warring gods should we serve? Or should we serve perhaps an entirely different god, and who is he?” Polytheism is a direct consequence of the process of rationalization. The absolute divorce between fact and value means that “the various value spheres of the world stand in irreconcilable conflict with each other,” with no factual basis for adjudicating their rival claims. Such conflicts can only be decided by non-rational means; we simply need to take the irrational leap of choosing some values.

Weber writes, “We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanting of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanting and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity.” Here it is important to note that Weber seems to observe no difference in the empirically observable behavior of ancient versus modern people. The difference lies in the presence or absence of some “mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity” to which Weber mysteriously claims access. Weber continues: “Many old gods ascend from their graves; they are disenchanting and hence take the form of impersonal forces. They strive to gain power over our lives and again they resume their eternal struggle with one another.”

In Weber’s view, Apollo has been replaced by impersonal forces like capitalism, but “gods” is not a casual metaphor. As Weber says, “they strive to gain power over our lives.” Weber

believed that the human individual has the freedom to make a decisive choice among the various gods on offer. But this choice stands out against the backdrop of the dreary constraints under which such a choice is made. The gods that can be chosen must struggle not only against each other, but against the gods that are simply given to us. Weber writes of how Puritan asceticism “did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt.” Weber continues on to say that “material goods have gained an increasing and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history.”

In the nineteenth century, figures like Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche thought that doing away with God or gods would lead to liberation for human beings. Humanity would finally take the reins of its own destiny in hand and effect liberating change. Weber is much more pessimistic. He emphasized the fragmented nature of human meaning and the power and inertia of large social institutions, such that liberating change would be impossible. Weber seems to agree with Marx and Nietzsche that there is no pre-given order, that we humans are making it all up. For Weber, however, human technical prowess produces wonders, but we come to be dominated by our own creations — living machines, he calls them — which are made in our own image and likeness. There is no true God out there to save us from ourselves. The creations of humanity are unpredictable and

ungovernable, precisely because there is no inherent order to the cosmos. And so humans are controlled by our own artifacts. As the monster says to Dr. Frankenstein, “You are my creator, but I am your master; obey!”

So the gods eliminated by rationalization return in a different form to rule over us. In the political sphere, Weber describes how nation-states employ rationalized violence to protect borders, pushing religious scruples — like the pacifism of the Sermon on the Mount — into the private sphere of values. But war then out-religions religion, creating a new form of devotion to the nation-state. “War...makes for an unconditionally devoted and sacrificial community among the combatants and releases an active mass compassion and love for those who are in need... In general, religions can show comparable achievements only in heroic communities professing an ethic of brotherliness.” Weber continues on to argue that the state does a better job than religion at giving meaning to death. In the economic sphere, Weber describes capitalism as the height of rationalization, precisely in its depersonalization of transactions. Money, says Weber, is “the most abstract and ‘impersonal’ element that exists in human life.” Weber adds, “For this reason one speaks of the rule of ‘capital’ and not that of capitalists.” Humans are not in charge, but are being ruled by a god of their own making. Making money is no longer a means to serve the life of people. “It is thought of so purely as an end in itself, that from the point of view of the happiness of, or utility to, the single individual, it appears entirely transcendental and absolutely irrational. Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life. Economic acquisition is no longer subordinated to man as the means for the satisfaction of his material needs.”

And so, in a supposedly secularized world, we continue to serve gods that are every bit as transcendent and irrational, in Weber's words, as the gods of old. The holy has not disappeared but migrated from the church to the state and the market. Note that Weber is not as interested in what people say they believe as he is in how they behave. This is why he can simultaneously describe people as disenchanting, and yet still sacrificing to gods.

### **Consumption**

So far we have been discussing the production side of modernity. Now I want to talk about consumption. We will move, that is, from the Amazon warehouse to the website, and to the happy packages that land on our doorsteps. Is this a realm of disenchantment, of rationalized materialistic existence?

The famous materialist Karl Marx did not think so. When a table is made for use, there is nothing mysterious about it. But when it becomes a commodity for exchange, Marx writes, "it is changed into something transcendent." It becomes a strange thing, "abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." As commodities, things float free from both the material conditions of their production and from their own physical properties as use values. "In order...to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour."

By "fetishism" Marx meant more than people obsessing about material things. He meant that material things become

enchanted and take on a life of their own, just as, in so-called “primitive” cultures, fetishes were small carvings that were seen as inhabited by spirits and capable of working magic. As commodities for exchange, objects are abstracted from their use, and their value depends not on their usefulness, but on what they can be exchanged for. For example, despite widespread hunger, farmers dump milk and the government warehouses cheese to support the price of dairy. What matters is the exchange value, not the use value. Commodities in effect are dematerialized, because their physical properties are swamped by their exchange value. Cheese is not primarily food for people to consume, but a commodity to be exchanged for money. Because their value is expressed relative to other commodities, Marx says, commodities establish social relations among themselves. In the market, commodities take on life and become subjects of social relations with other commodities.

While things take on life, life is drained away from actual people. Hungry people don't count in the market unless they have money. In the labor market, labor is abstract and interchangeable, and human beings are regarded as “labor costs” which need to be minimized. The conditions of work are hidden by commodities. All that the consumer sees in the store or on *amazon.com* is the commodity and its price. It takes a Herculean effort to uncover the people who actually made the product and delivered it, and the conditions under which they worked. It is the commodities that are visible, not the people; commodities take on life as life is extracted from people. This exchange of life from humans to products is captured by Eduardo Galeano's description of life under free-market military dictatorships in Latin America in the 1970s and 80s: “People were in prison so that prices could be free.”

As did Weber, Marx observes that “the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him.”

Before the industrial revolution, people made nearly everything they had in their homes, or it was made by people they knew. Things were closely linked to their makers and to their use value. Now we make almost nothing, and buy everything. There is no point to romanticizing the poverty of the past. But it is hard to overestimate what a change this is in how we relate to the material world and to other people. When the sheer volume of things in the world took a quantum leap in the 19th century because of mass production, people needed to be taught, as one advertising manual put it in 1901, that “they have wants which they did not recognize before.” People had to fall in love with commodities. Commodities had to be more than things to be used. They had to be enchanted.

If we take a look at advertising over the course of the 20th century, we can see how things took flight from the material world and into the realm of transcendence. In the 19th century, advertising was largely informational: you can buy shoes at John H. Johnson’s shop. By the early 20th century, advertising had become more about persuading than informing, but it was still closely related to the physical product. In a shoe advertisement, the ad showed a picture of the shoe and talked about the virtues of the actual physical shoe. The objective was to convince the reader that this is a comfortable, reasonably priced, well-made, and stylish shoe. The ad appealed both to the consumer’s rational sense of use value — shoes should be easy to walk in and not fall apart too quickly — and also to the buyer’s more intangible sense of fashion, of being recognized by others as stylish and as having the good sense to buy a reputable brand.



By the mid-20th century, there was a shift farther away from use value and toward the more intangible and spiritual aspirations of the consumer for freedom, sex, prestige, recognition, and other forms of transcendence. Now, as in this shoe ad on the screen behind me, the shoe still appears, but gone is any appeal to use value. There is no description of the virtues of the physical shoe itself, indeed no mention of the shoe at all. Under the influence of Freud, Pavlov, and other psychologists, advertisers began to appeal not to the conscious self but to the subconscious. The ad does not lie, because it doesn't make any explicit claims about the shoe at all. It simply associates a physical commodity with a set of non-physical aspirations, in this case, towards transcendence of one's own drab life and into a realm of pathetic male fantasy, where beautiful women drop at one's feet and submit to one's every wish. As in Pavlov's experiments with dogs, two completely different things — meat and a bell, domination and dress shoes — are associated in the subconscious. The second of these things matters little; Pavlov could have used a whistle instead of a bell, sex can be associated with cars or shampoo or soda as well as shoes. The actual material object has begun to matter less than the fantasy world associated with them.

As consumerism is taking flight from products, the brand comes to take on more importance than the actual material objects. Beginning in the 1940s, corporations began exploring what brands mean to culture and to people's lives. Brands increasingly became ways of marking one's identity. Corporate marketers like Bruce Barton began to encourage businesses to discover their "souls." More and more, corporations used theological language to describe themselves. As one corporate manager frankly put it, "Corporate branding is really about

worldwide beliefs management.”

By the beginning of the 21st century, as this ad shows, the actual product was capable of vanishing entirely. The leading corporations are now more concerned with manufacturing brands than with manufacturing products. Products are made in the factory; brands are made in the mind. According to Naomi Klein, the key moment was when in 1988 Philip Morris bought not Kraft-the-company, but Kraft-the-brand for 12.6 billion dollars. As Klein says of transcendent brands, "Liberated from the real-world burdens of stores and product manufacturing, these brands are free to soar, less as the disseminators of goods or services than as collective hallucinations." What Starbucks sells is not so much coffee, as CEO Howard Schultz puts it, but "the romance of the coffee experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbucks stores." As Klein writes: "The old paradigm had it that all marketing was selling a product. In the new market, however, the product always takes a back seat to the real product, the brand, and the selling of the brand acquired an extra component that can only be described as spiritual. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence." Empirical research backs Klein's claim. In a series of studies published as "Brands: The Opiate of the Nonreligious Masses?" in the journal *Marketing Science*, researchers from the United States and Israel found that those subjects with strong traditional religious ties were much less likely to choose name brands for products that are used as a form of self-expression. The authors conclude that consumer behavior and brand loyalty function as substitutes for traditional religion.

Commodity fetishism is not simply an obsession with things. It is not materialism, but rather a kind of dematerialization. When

use takes a back seat to exchange, commodities are inhabited by spirits, and they become vehicles for a flight into the realm of transcendence.

### **Idolatry**

So maybe we are not so disenchanting after all. Both Weber and Marx think that, regardless of what people say they believe, modern people's behavior shows them still to be in the thrall of their own creations. Enchantment still haunts the material world. For Weber, production becomes a living machine that traps us, and for Marx, products take on a life of their own that drain life away from us. And this fact of being dominated by our own creations seems to be hidden from us, as we assume the world is rationalized and disenchanting.

In this last section of the talk, I will show that all of these themes appear already in the biblical critique of idolatry. We modern people tend to shy away from idolatry critique, because it seems intolerant and even violent: "You don't worship like we do, so you're an idolater." And yet the concept of idolatry seems to capture something important about the contemporary scene that cannot be left behind. Even though Pope Francis is renowned for his optimism and love for all, he makes frequent recourse to the language of idolatry. In Francis' first encyclical, *Lumen fidei*, for example, he states that the opposite of faith is not a simple lack of belief but idolatry. When one stops believing in God, one does not simply stop believing; rather one believes in all sorts of things, "an aimless passing from one lord to another. . . Those who choose not to put their trust in God must hear the din of countless idols crying out: 'Put your trust in me!'" Francis has repeatedly used the language of idolatry when describing the contemporary economic

system. For example, “We have created new idols. The worship of the ancient golden calf (cf. Ex 32:1–35) has returned in a new and ruthless guise in the idolatry of money and the dictatorship of an impersonal economy lacking a truly human purpose.”

Idolatry as Francis is using it here does not refer to the explicit worship of gods with proper names. Although the Bible often does use the term in this way — to refer to sacrificing to the god Baal, for example — the Bible more commonly treats idolatry as a matter of behavior, not belief, as in Weber and Marx. The ban on idolatry does not necessarily deny the existence of other gods, but only forbids worshipping them. Idolatry is not primarily considered a metaphysical error, but a betrayal of loyalty to the God of Israel. For this reason, the primary biblical images for idolatry are adultery and political disloyalty. The image of adultery is exemplified by the story of Hosea, who is told to marry a whore to symbolize the dalliances of Israel with other gods, “for the country itself has become nothing but a whore by abandoning the LORD” (Hos. 1:2). The political image is exemplified by I Samuel 8, when the Israelites ask for a king to reign over them. God says to Samuel, “it is not you they have rejected but me, not wishing me to reign over them anymore. They are now doing to you exactly what they have done to me since the day I brought them out of Egypt until now, deserting me and serving other gods” (I Sam. 8:7–8). Idolatry is more than a metaphor here; although the king is not explicitly worshipped as a god, putting trust in a king instead of in God to protect them is idolatry. Note, though, that God accepts the existence of kings for Israel, as long as they don’t replace God. Idolatry, in this case and in most cases, is on a spectrum of more or less; it is not always clear when the line between using creation faithfully and idolatry has been crossed.

Idolatry in a general sense is when people give an inordinate amount of trust or loyalty to something created, rather than God. Isaiah, for example, accuses the Israelites of idolatry for putting trust in an alliance with the Egyptian army. “Woe to those going down to Egypt for help, who put their trust in horses, who rely on the quantity of chariots, and on great strength of cavalymen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel” (Is. 31:1). Isaiah links this turning away from God with the idolatrous reliance on what is created instead of the Creator: “The Egyptian is human, not divine, his horses are flesh, not spirit” (Is. 31:3). In the biblical view, anything created can be an object of idolatry. So Paul criticizes those whose “gods are their bellies...[and] their minds are set on earthly things” (Phil. 3:19), and warns against “greed, which is the same thing as worshipping a false god” (Col. 3:5).

The way Pope Francis speaks of the idolatry of money, therefore, is deeply biblical, and it illustrates the fact that for the Bible, idolatry is not merely a “religious” matter, but an “economic” and “political” matter as well. The Bible does not make such distinctions. Idolatry-critique is not necessarily religious intolerance; Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal in I Kings 18 is not just about “religion.” The rival gods represent two rival systems of rule and rival systems of property. The name “Baal” means “owner.” The Baalist kings had absolute power, and property was an alienable commodity under Canaanite law. For the Israelites, by contrast, the king was subject to the monarchy of God, and property was inalienable. Each family had their *nachalah*, their share of property. Idolatry was religious, political, and economic at the same time.

As Timothy Gorringer comments on this passage, “Every generation will be confronted with its own Ba’als, their own

strange gods, who grab power over them and seek to devour them.” Weber’s and Marx’s idea that we become dominated by our own creations is embedded in the biblical critique of idolatry. In I Samuel 8, when the people ask for a king to replace God, Samuel warns them that the king will take their sons for his armies and their daughters as servants, and will confiscate their land and harvest and animals for his own benefit, and finally, “you shall be his slaves. And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the LORD will not answer you in that day” (I Sam. 8:17-18). Jesus is drawing on a long tradition of idolatry as domination when he warns “You cannot serve both God and money” (Matthew 6:24). Jesus uses the term “Mammon” here to personify money as a god, one that demands service.

The idea in Weber and Marx that inanimate objects come alive by taking life from us is also found first in the Bible. In Isaiah 6, those who craft idols out of wood and stone become as deaf and dumb and mute as their creations, though they imagine that their creations take on life. In Isaiah 44, a man uses half a block of wood to cook his dinner and the other half to make an idol, to which he bows down and pleads “Save me, for you are my god!” Though he imagines that the idol lives, in fact he drains life from himself. The narrator comments “All who make idols are nothing, and the things they delight in do not profit.” Likewise, Psalm 115 says “their idols are silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see...They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk...Those who make them will be like them, and so will all who trust in them.” Again, the attribution of life to inanimate objects steals life from the humans who make them or trust in them.

The biblical concern with idolatry implies that humans are spontaneously worshipping creatures. In Exodus, the Israelites could stand only a little less than six weeks of Moses' absence (cf. Ex. 24:18) before they demanded new gods to worship: "When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us'" (Ex. 32:1). The story of the Golden Calf that Aaron made is a story not only of the human capacity for self-deception, but also of the inherent human need to worship. This recognition allows for a sympathetic account of idolatry. When Paul is in Athens, the book of Acts reports that he is "distressed to see that the city was full of idols" (17:16). But he also sees the Athenians' idolatry as evidence that they are searching for meaning and ultimately for the true God. God created everything and is therefore in all things, allowing that people "would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him — though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For," Paul tells the pagans, "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said 'For we too are his offspring.'"

Weber explains the basic human need to worship in terms of the need for meaning, which leads us inevitably to make gods. Weber is pessimistic that this need can be overcome; we are stuck in the iron cage, the Amazon warehouse is our fate. Marx, on the other hand, is convinced that people will cease making gods once the revolution comes, workers control the means of production, and labor ceases to be alienated from its own products. But the revolution came and made new gods of the communist state, to whom tens of millions of lives were sacrificed. Unlike Weber and Marx, the Bible thinks there is a real God, different from all our

manufactured gods. Rather than us creating gods, there is a God that created us, and loves us, and wants us to build a kingdom of peace and justice here on earth.

In his famous Kenyon College commencement address in 2005, novelist David Foster Wallace told the graduates: “in the day-to day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.” He goes on to say that the reason you might want to worship a real God “is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive.” Worship money, and you’ll never have enough. Worship your body, and you will always feel ugly. Worship power, and you will always be afraid. And so on.

As Weber and Marx and the Bible intuit, however, avoiding idolatry is not as simple as making a personal choice to change one’s attitude about worship. Idolatry is embedded in whole economic and social and political systems that hold us all in their thrall. In an unjust system, we are all idolaters, and there needs to be systemic change to free people from false worship. If there is no true God, the task seems impossible. But as Jesus tells the disciples, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible” (Mt. 19:26).

### **Q&A with Stephen Aduato**

**Stephen Aduato:** In your lecture, you focused on the idols of technology, prosperity, and material possessions. I think it’s also worth mentioning that some of the greatest idols of the 20th century were political in nature, for example Marxism, fascism, and totalitarianism. How does the phenomenon of political idolatry fit into your narrative about the idolatry of consumer



capitalism?

**Cavanaugh:** Good question. I'm going to confess that you can only do so much in a lecture, so I decided to concentrate on the economic issue. But in the book of which this is a part, there's going to be stuff on the political ramifications of this as well, and it certainly is the case that Marxism, fascism — these are easy to see. Nationalism has been called a religion. Carlton Hayes has a book called *Nationalism: A Religion*, and it points out that nationalism is on the upswing again. It's a complex phenomenon because there are real virtues that are being tapped into. There is the love of something, a devotion to something larger than oneself. There is self-sacrifice; there's love of your neighbors and other people that you consider to be part of your group; but political idolatry is particularly dangerous precisely because it's parasitic on these kinds of real virtues.

There's a lot that's been written on nationalism as a kind of replacement for the Church, and so as the 19th century rolls on, there's a kind of what I call a migration of the holy from the Church to the state, and it becomes a kind of replacement for God. When there's no God to unite us all, we worship ourselves, we worship us. Nationalism is kind of a celebration of us, and it's a sort of deification of us, and that seems to me to be a particularly dangerous thing, and it's not always easy to separate.

Jean-Luc Marion, a great Catholic philosopher, talks about a kind of splendid idolatry, and in some ways the splendid idolatry is more noble, and precisely because of that fact, a little bit more dangerous than the kind of un-splendid idolatry that I've been talking about now. So I'm going to talk about splendid and un-splendid types of idolatry. If I can find a better word or if anybody has a suggestion for a better word than un-splendid, I'd love to

hear it. But in this lecture I wanted to talk about the economic idolatry that's embedded in the way we treat the material world in some ways, because it's more subtle and it's more quotidian. It's just part of our daily interaction with the material world, and so it's much easier for it to go unnoticed.

**Aduato.** You cited Weber saying, "We live as did the ancients when their world was not yet disenchanting of its gods and demons, only we live in a different sense. As Hellenic man at times sacrificed to Aphrodite and at other times to Apollo, and, above all, as everybody sacrificed to the gods of his city, so do we still nowadays, only the bearing of man has been disenchanting and denuded of its mystical but inwardly genuine plasticity." While modernity has largely done away with explicitly religious language and practices, it can't get rid of the religious sense, or the intrinsic human desire for meaning. So much so that we still try to find meaning, but now through the idolization of material possessions. Can you say more about the ineradicable nature of the human need for meaning?

**Cavanaugh:** How do I know that we have a religious sense? One way, it's biblical. I cited a few things in the talk, but there's also 2 Kings 17, where they talked about how the Israelites went around putting altars "under every green tree," and I kind of feel like that's us. We have the spontaneous need for worship, and to put objects of worship under every green tree, but that is just part of who we are as people that relate to the material world in a sacramental sort of way, and so the line between sacramentalism and idolatry is a chasm that's a mile deep and an inch wide. It's very easy to step over even though it's a tremendous chasm, but Paul is trying to work on that in Acts 17, where he says God is creator and thus is in all of the beautiful things of this world, so

that we can grope and find God there. But of course it all depends on how you do it.

There's a wonderful story in Dorothy Day's autobiography, *The Long Loneliness*, Forster, her atheist — at the time — live-in, common-law husband. This is before she converted to Catholicism. They're on the beach in Staten Island looking out at the beauty of nature. Forster always wanted Dorothy to remain in nature and appreciate nature for itself. Dorothy always thought you couldn't appreciate it for itself if you didn't look at it and see the kind of throbbing transcendence, the beauty of God the Creator that comes through all of these things. And the difference between Forster and Dorothy is, I think, the difference between a kind of idolatry and whatever the opposite of faith is, but they both have this this kind of religious sense, this search for meaning.

I just think that Bruce Springsteen's right: "Everybody's got a hungry heart." Or pick the Eurhythmics and say "Everybody's looking for something." Or Bob Dylan, "You're gonna have to serve somebody. / Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord / But you're gonna have to serve somebody."

John Lennon actually wrote a response to that called "Serve Yourself," and that in some ways is the dichotomy: you've got to serve; you've got to serve somebody. You've got to serve God or you end up serving yourself, and I think Lennon thought of that as a positive thing. I'm not sure about that because for me it seems obvious that everybody's looking for something, that everybody's looking for transcendence. The only real question is, is there anything out there? Is the world comedy or a tragedy? I think Sartre basically thought, Yeah, everybody's searching for something, but the joke is there's nothing there, so ultimately it's a tragedy, a tragic kind of joke.

Monsignor Albacete kind of saw the world as a comedy, not in the ha-ha-funny sense, although it certainly is that, but also in the sense that the resolution is something good and beautiful, and that we have this sense precisely because there's a God-shaped hole in our hearts, precisely because there's a God there who made us.

**Aduato:** Continuing on the point of the religious sense, Msgr. Albacete wrote and spoke extensively about the relationship between reason and the need for meaning. In his book *God at the Ritz*, he says, "Reason is the knowledge of reality according to the totality of factors." Quoting Fr. Giussani, "The reasonable person is precisely the one who is open to all the aspects of the experience of reality. Reason or rationality understood in this way is a demand of the heart of primordial or fundamental need for the experience of totality, of ultimate meaning, of sense. This makes reason into a manifestation of the religious sense itself which is precisely the experience of the totality of life."

So here we see Albacete challenging the idea that the desire for meaning is something sentimental or irrational. Or as Weber would say, "separating meaning and value from hard facts." What can you say about the relationship between reason and the religious sense or the desire for transcendence?

**Cavanaugh:** Stephen, you're a teacher, right? I don't know about your students, but my students don't draw boundaries around these questions in the way that we try to train them to. Students get frustrated with the biology professor when they're studying evolution and want to raise theological questions, because the biology professor often says, "Hmmm, you know I don't do that. Go talk to the theology department." The students get frustrated with that for good reason, I think, and you can see it

in the way that even among scientists there's this spillover effect.

Weber says, "Oh, science doesn't answer meaning questions," but there are scientists out there who are trying to answer. Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist, is not content to be a biologist; he wants to be a philosopher too because there's the sense that you need a whole. That's what Monsignor Albacete is looking at, this kind of wholeness. Nobody really wants to specialize. Everybody wants a kind of broader framework. E.O. Wilson, another atheist biologist, wants to colonize the humanities for science and says that science is the only thing there is because he can't be content with what's there. So it seems to me like there's this natural drive for holistic kinds of explanations that we need in order for a reason to work. I think this is what Pope John Paul II is saying in *Fides et Ratio*, that in order for reason to work, you need a larger framework.

To give one example, Steven Pinker and Douglas Lakoff both have published books in which they try to extract politics out of evolutionary biology, and they say evolutionary biology makes human beings this way, and so we just need to be scientific about this and get our politics from science. The only problem is that they come to opposite conclusions. One is a Democrat and the other is a Republican, and they both say, "Well, it's clearly obviously this is what science comes to..." It just doesn't work without a larger framework where you break down these fact/value dichotomies.

**Adubato:** Going back to the Pope, I overheard recently that in an airplane interview Francis declared that shopping on Amazon is now a mortal sin. Can you verify this claim?

**Cavanaugh:** You're making crap up, aren't you Steve? (*laughs*)

**Adubato:** But in reality, on this topic of Amazon, I can say for myself that I have come to rely on it more and more, especially because being able to access a product within a matter of days at

a discounted price is very convenient, especially being a teacher running around every day. But hearing your lecture, hearing what you had to say, it makes me stop and think, *At what cost?* I'm able to access all these products very easily, but behind the scenes I don't really like hearing what's going on in these warehouses. But then the alternative, to go to a locally-owned bookstore, to actually go out of my way, get in my car and drive there, pay full price for the book, or whatever it is — is becoming less appealing. So, realistically, how can we face the fact that we are living in Amazon's world and that it's becoming more and more difficult to stop relying on these idols of consumption and efficiency?

**Cavanaugh:** Part of what I'm trying to push back against is this idea that we live in Amazon's world. We *don't* live in Amazon's world; we live in *God's* world, and the idea that this is just our fate is something I think is poisonous. The idea that there's nothing there. Have you seen the movie *The Mission* with Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons? After they destroy the Jesuit missions for reasons of state, the Portuguese representative says, "Well, we have to act in the world and the world is thus." And another character says, "No, thus have we made it." And then he looks in the camera and says, "Thus have I made it." He was the one who authorized the decision. And that is crucial.

The opening chapters of Genesis push back against the idea of fate, saying that the whole idea of the fall is not pessimistic; it's *optimistic* because the fall means that there's something good to fall away from. The original creation is good but then gets messed up, and that means that the way things are is not the way things are meant to be, and the way things are is not the way things really are in God's eyes. The idea that it's just the way it is — we really need to push against that.

And there are certain things that we can do. One of the first

things that needs to be done is to push back against this idea that we're just fated and there's nothing we can do because this is something that we made. The point of the whole lecture is that this is not something that is a given. This is something that we made. These are our creations and we can unmake them. We make it through our own demand for cheap stuff, so the first thing is to push back against this idea of fate. The second thing: seeing people. The whole problem with our economic system is that it makes people invisible, and Internet shopping has ramped it up to an *nth* degree. Now you need to have no contact with another human being at all. You don't need to see a picture of another human being. All you see is the product. You click on it and then it appears on your doorstep. So we need to start seeing the people who are behind it, the people who are paying with their own lives to make this convenient for us, and then we need to resist and find other ways of doing things. I never order anything off of Amazon. I look it up on Amazon and then order it from my local book store and it means an extra trip.

There's this wonderful essay by Wendell Berry called *The Joy of Sales Resistance*, and I think this is the final thing that I want to say. It has to become part of our spirituality. You have to find joy in this encounter with other people, and joy in the resistance to the man, sticking it to the man; that's Wendell Berry's *The Joy of Sales Resistance*. It's an encounter with the material world in a different way that is ultimately sacramental, and the goal is not purity. I'm not pure by any means. We're all enmeshed in this kind of system and we're all idolaters, so the goal is not purity. The goal is a kind of receptivity to what God is doing in in our world, and I think God is doing beautiful things in small kinds of economic experiments that are going on out there. People are finding ways to reconnect with one another through material things, and through the

relationship with the process of production and consumption, and that's a beautiful thing.

It's God's world; it's not Amazon's world.

**Aubato:** I think what's most interesting about your presentation is that you draw together these common threads within three very different sources. Weber, Marx, and the Bible all converge in their recognition that idolatry of material possessions confines the person. There's a sense that we are trapped, and that human power alone is not enough to free us. Now, you reference Luke's Gospel when Jesus says, "Nothing is impossible for God." Here we see the biblical treatment of idolatry offers a nuance, that although an act of human will is not enough to liberate the person from idolatry, the human can use his freedom to open himself to God's initiative, but ultimately the possibility of liberation comes from God. With that being said, tell us a little bit more about where you see God acting in Amazon's world. What exactly can He do for us as we're trying to make our way through this iron cage?

**Cavanaugh:** There's that section in the second chapter of the Book of Acts where it talks about how the early Church community met and broke bread and rejoiced together and held all of their goods in common, and everyday people were added to their numbers because they could see the joy of this. That's really the only way you can witness to the idea that the Messiah has come. So you could excuse the Jews and the pagans at the time for saying, "What do you mean the Messiah has come? What messiah? The world still looks the same to me. People are still killing each other. What difference? What messiah?" And the only response that the early Church could give was in their lives. They said, "No, the world has changed, and here, look at this community living differently in this joyful way that's receptive to God's grace."

The wonderful thing about concentrating on these acts of

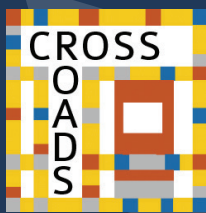


consumption and so on is that they can be very small things; they don't have to be terribly heroic things, but just small, beautiful things that connect the material world with people and make it a more of a just world.

When I lived in Minnesota, there was a consortium of churches that had a relationship with a cooperative of organic farmers and they marketed directly through the churches. That was one way of creating this alternative economic space that was not ruled by supply and demand, and that was not ruled by a ruthless kind of profit motive, but was ruled by grace. That's the only way we can witness to what God is doing among us, it seems.

**Aduvato:** Please join me in thanking Dr. Cavanaugh one more time. I'd like to close with a quote by one of Msgr. Albacete's favorite authors, Franz Kafka, which I think really captures the position of someone who is aware of his need for a meaning that transcends the power of an idol, that is, something that is revealed from beyond himself.

"I try to be a true attendant upon grace. Perhaps it will come — perhaps it will not come. Perhaps this quiet yet unquiet waiting is the harbinger of grace, or perhaps it is grace itself. I do not know. But that does not disturb me. In the meantime I have made friends with my ignorance."



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